

RESEARCH ARTICLE

If Only my Leader Would just Do *Something!* Passive Leadership Undermines Employee Well-being Through Role Stressors and Psychological Resource Depletion

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to develop and test a sequential mediational model explaining the negative relationship of passive leadership to employee well-being. Based on role stress theory, we posit that passive leadership will predict higher levels of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. Invoking Conservation of Resources theory, we further hypothesize that these role stressors will indirectly and negatively influence two aspects of employee well-being, namely overall mental health and overall work attitude, through psychological work fatigue. Using a probability sample of 2467 US workers, structural equation modelling supported the model by showing that role stressors and psychological work fatigue partially mediated the negative relationship between passive leadership and both aspects of employee well-being. The hypothesized, sequential indirect relationships explained 47.9% of the overall relationship between passive leadership and mental health and 26.6% of the overall relationship between passive leadership and overall work attitude. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Keywords

passive leadership; *laissez-faire* leadership; role stressors; psychological work fatigue; Conservation of Resources theory; mental health

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Introduction

A substantial body of evidence-based knowledge exists regarding the effects of bad leadership. Not surprisingly, most of this research has focused on more visible and outrageous forms of bad leadership. Taking abusive supervision as one example, Martinko, Harvey, Brees and Mackey (2013) identified 82 empirical studies published on abusive supervision between 2000 and 2012. In contrast, passive leadership—where leaders avoid or delay taking necessary actions—has received relatively little scrutiny, and there are at least two conceptual reasons for this neglect. Firstly, within the transformational leadership paradigm, passive leadership (or what is referred to as *laissez faire*

leadership¹) rests on the negative ends of effective–ineffective and active–passive continua, with the assumption that as long as leaders do nothing they cannot do any real harm. Secondly, recent models of destructive leadership explicitly exclude passive leadership because of the absence of intent by leaders to

¹We retain the use of the term 'laissez faire' leadership when it is used explicitly in research under discussion, such as within transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 1996), and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. More generally, however, we use the term 'passive leadership' throughout to capture leadership behaviours that reflect disengagement or unwillingness to take action as the leader.

harm the organization or its employees (e.g. Kelloway *et al.*, 2005; Krasikova, Green & LeBreton, 2013; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Nonetheless, the small but growing body of literature that does exist suggests that passive leadership is associated with a number of potential harms.

Early studies showed that passive leadership (or what was referred to then as leader 'role abdication') was linked to employees' role ambiguity and conflict (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). More recently, research has more directly linked passive leadership with role ambiguity and poor role clarity (e.g. Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø & Einarsen, 2014). Not surprisingly, therefore, some evidence exists that passive leadership is negatively related to employee well-being (Zineldin & Hytter, 2012) and work attitudes, such as job satisfaction (Buch, Martinsen & Kuvaas, 2015; Judge & Piccolo, 2004) and affective organizational commitment (Jackson, Meyer, & Wang, 2013). Further, CEO passive leadership is associated with poor top management team effectiveness (Flood *et al.*, 2000), and a meta-analysis by Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that *laissez-faire* leadership was negatively related to leader effectiveness. In sum, a growing evidence base shows that passive leadership contributes to exposure to work-related stressors and is negatively related to important organizational and personal outcomes.

Nonetheless, little effort has been devoted to the development of conceptual models that attempt to explain how passive leadership influences important employee outcomes. The goal of the present study, therefore, was to develop and test a sequential mediational model linking passive leadership to employee mental health and overall work attitude via role stressors and psychological work fatigue (i.e. depletion of mental and emotional resources). To do so, we integrate across two separate literatures (i.e. leadership and work stress), and two different theories of work stress (i.e. role stress and conservation of resources theories). The hypothesized conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. We develop the theoretical and empirical rationale for the model later.

Passive leadership and role stressors

Although hundreds of peer-reviewed, empirical studies on leadership are published each year (Barling, 2014), the primary focus of much of this research is on 'higher impact theories or models of leadership' (Avolio *et al.*, 2009, p. 765) that largely represent charismatic, transformational, inspirational and ethical leadership. However, what is lost in all this 'new' research is a focus on 'traditional' models of leadership that emphasize the leaders' role in providing direction and support, and ensuring that appropriate reward (and punishment) structures are in place that help to provide clarity about performance standards and expectations. As we will show, leaders' failure to do so may create a work environment that can compromise employees' ability to meet performance expectations, and may undermine their well-being.

To understand why passive leadership has negative effects for employees requires an appreciation of the basic functions of leadership. Effective performance and well-being depend, in part, on employees understanding what is expected of them at work. This would include an understanding of the various aspects of the process involved in task completion, including required standards for performance. After all, it would be pointless to complete work on time if it does not meet minimum quality standards. Also, it would be counterproductive for employees to do high quality work that is not completed on time. When leaders explicitly share the information and expectations that are required for employees to do their work, or do so implicitly by rewarding positive behaviours or admonishing negative behaviours (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), the basic functions of leadership are fulfilled. However, it cannot be taken for granted that this always occurs in organizations. For example, in their national sample of 1500 American workers, Kahn *et al.* (1964) reported that 38% of their respondents were distressed because they did not receive the information necessary for adequate job performance. More recently, Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen and Einarsen (2010) showed in their representative sample of Norwegian workers that 21% of

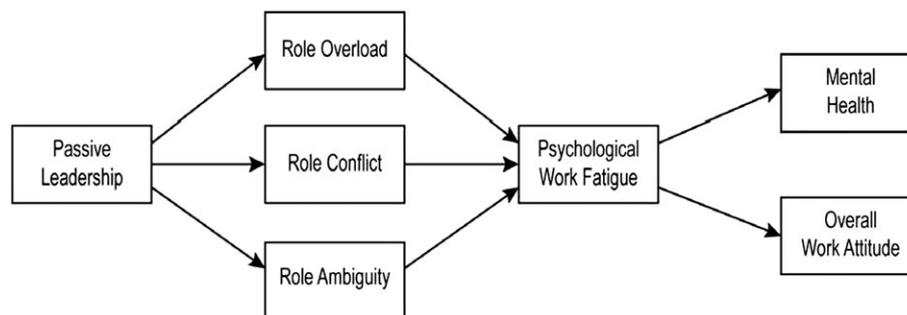


Figure 1. Conceptual model of passive leadership, role stressors, psychological work fatigue and employee well-being

employees had experienced passive leadership in the prior 6 months. Therefore, given the prevalence of exposure to passive leadership among employees, and the fact that passive leadership represents a failure to carry out the basic functions of leadership, it is important to explore further its potential to undermine employees' ability to successfully enact their work roles.

Introduced by Kahn *et al.* (1964), role ambiguity refers to the difference between the amount of information available and the amount required for successful performance, and role conflict refers to incompatible demands made by at least two people, often supervisors, on a third person. Based on role theory (Kahn *et al.*, 1964), we expect that the lack of guidance and information reflective of passive leadership would heighten employees' role ambiguity. In addition, passive leadership may increase the likelihood of employees experiencing role conflict because passive leaders will not actively manage task and interpersonal processes in such a way as to minimize experienced role conflict among members of their organization or team. For example, an accounts service employee may be subject to competing demands from two salespersons. However, a passive supervisor will be less likely to have procedures in place to reduce the likelihood of role conflict occurring and may be less likely to quickly intervene if role conflict should occur. Although little research has explicitly explored the link between passive leadership and either role ambiguity or role conflict, several studies provide support for these relationships. Firstly, Jackson and Schuler (1985) found that low initiating structure by leaders (a potential proxy for passive leadership) was positively related to role conflict and role ambiguity. Secondly, Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen (2007) reported cross-sectional evidence that *laissez faire* leadership was positively related to role ambiguity and role conflict. Thirdly, Skogstad *et al.* (2014) showed a time-lagged effect of *laissez faire* leadership on role ambiguity, although no other role stressors were simultaneously assessed. Finally, perhaps the strongest support for the link between passive leadership and role ambiguity derives from Schaubroeck, Ganster, Sime and Ditman's (1993) field experiment showing that management training in clarifying roles reduced employee role ambiguity.

Missing from the earlier discussion, and frequently missing from research on role stressors, is a consideration of role overload. Initially conceived as a special form of role conflict (Kahn *et al.*, 1964), role overload exists when people believe that the demands placed on them cannot be fulfilled in the available time (quantitative overload) or that they lack the skills for satisfactory task performance (qualitative overload). Given that some of the basic leadership functions include scheduling work and setting deadlines, on the one hand, and making training opportunities available to

enable appropriate skills acquisition on the other, passive leadership may expose employees to both quantitative and qualitative role overload. Furthermore, Katz and Kahn (1978) pointed out that 'since organizational activity must be geared to certain constancies in a time schedule, changed inputs create a condition of overload in one or more of the organizational subsystems' (p. 451). Changed inputs can include changes in personnel due to voluntary or involuntary attrition or changes in demands made across interdependent jobs or departments. One would expect that passive leaders are not likely to intervene in such cases at all or not soon enough to minimize excessive role demands placed on their employees. Relatedly, supervisors who fail to provide direction and feedback would leave employees, especially those committed to the organization or involved in their work, with a greater quantitative load as they seek to establish for themselves what work needs to be done, what work might be rewarded and what work can be safely ignored. Thus, despite the absence of available research, we suggest that passive leadership also would increase employees' experience of role overload. Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1 Passive leadership will be positively associated with role overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity.

Role stressors, psychological resource depletion and employee well-being

A substantial body of literature has accumulated on the negative outcomes of role stressors since Kahn *et al.*'s (1964) initial research (e.g., Beehr & Glazer, 2005; Eatough *et al.*, 2011; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Suffice it to say that role stressors have consistently been negatively associated with two broad aspects of employee well-being, namely mental health (e.g. anxiety: Caplan & Jones, 1975; depression: Schmidt, Roesler, Kusserow, & Rau 2014) and work attitudes (e.g. affective organizational commitment: Chênevert, Vandenberghe, Doucet, & Ben Ayed, 2013; job satisfaction: e.g. Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Despite the negative relationship between role stressors and employee well-being, research has not explored the potential process linking these variables. As shown in Figure 1, we propose that psychological work fatigue (i.e. psychological resource depletion) mediates the relationship between role stressors and employee well-being.

The proposed intervening role of psychological work fatigue is based on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). According to COR theory, people have a finite set of valued resources, which they are motivated to obtain, retain and protect,

which include energies. Stress outcomes are experienced when individuals are threatened with resource loss, actually lose resources, or fail to regain resources following resource investment. For example, to meet demands imposed by role stressors, individuals need to expend (lose) cognitive and/or emotional energy. Thus, COR theory suggests that role stressors can lead to an energy depletion process resulting in psychological work fatigue, and COR theory is especially relevant given the chronic nature of role stress. Two of the defining criteria for chronic (as opposed to acute) stressors are that (a) they endure for long periods of time and (b) have no 'end point' (i.e. individuals in the situation would see no end in sight to the stressor; Barling, Bluen & Fain, 1987). Given that the most powerful source of role stressors is the quality of supervision (Kahn *et al.*, 1964), chronic exposure to passive leadership will lead to chronic exposure to role stressors. That exposure to passive leadership can be chronic receives support from the multi-wave longitudinal study of Skogstad *et al.* (2014) in which the stability coefficients for *laissez faire* leadership across 2 and 3 years were 0.65 and 0.53, respectively ($n = 1771$). Finally, meta-analytic studies have reported that chronic exposure to role conflict, ambiguity and overload are positively related to emotional work fatigue (i.e. chronic psychological resource depletion; Alarcan, 2011; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). The chronic nature of these stressors is especially important because faced with on-going exposure, resource replenishment becomes unlikely. Moreover, as Christie and Barling (2009) showed in their longitudinal study, chronic work stress will not just prevent resource replenishment but is also more likely to result in downward resource spirals.

COR theory further proposes that chronic resource depletion is itself psychologically damaging, thereby leading to lower levels of employee well-being. Thus, we expect that chronic psychological work fatigue will be associated with poor mental health and work attitudes. Meta-analytic research supports this by showing that emotional exhaustion is negatively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Alarcan, 2011; Lee & Ashforth, 1996) and is negatively related to mental health (Huang, Du, Chen, Yang & Huang, 2010; van Daalen, Willemsen, Sanders, & van Veldhoven, 2009). Finally, although Huang *et al.* (2011) did not assess role conflict or ambiguity, they found that role overload was negatively and indirectly related to mental health via increased emotional exhaustion. Based on this discussion, the following specific hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2 Role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity will be positively related to psychological work fatigue.

Hypothesis 3 Psychological work fatigue will be negatively related to both mental health and overall work attitude.

Hypothesis 4 Role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity will be negatively and indirectly related to mental health and overall work attitude via psychological work fatigue.

Passive leadership and employee well-being

The relations described earlier collectively present a sequential mediational process that indirectly links passive leadership to employee mental health and overall work attitude via role stressors and psychological work fatigue. Therefore, we further hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5 Passive leadership will be negatively and indirectly related to mental health and overall work attitude via role stressors and psychological work fatigue.

Method

Sample and study design

There were 2975 US workers who took part in a national telephone survey called the National Survey of Work Stress and Health.² The population from which the study participants were randomly sampled was all non-institutionalized adults aged 18 to 65 years who were currently employed in the civilian labour force and residing in households in the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia. Data were collected by 29 extensively trained interviewers using computer-assisted telephone interviewing stations from December 2008 to April 2011. Of all selected eligible individuals, 47% participated in the study. Before being interviewed, informed consent was obtained from all participants. On average, the interview lasted 55 min and participants were paid \$25.00 for their time. Of the 2975 study participants, the present analyses were restricted to the 2467 wages and salary workers (owner/operators were excluded) who had complete data on all of the variables used in this study.

Sampling weights

For all analyses, the participants are weighted according to standard procedures for sample survey data (e.g. Korn & Graubard, 1999; Levy & Lemeshow, 1999) to generalize to the target population defined earlier. The sampling weights account for differences in the initial selection probability for the reached

²The present paper is based on a large national survey that was developed to address a number of substantive issues. In addition to the present paper, participants and data from this larger project have been used in several other papers (Frone, 2015, 2016, in press; Frone & Tidwell, 2015). Despite some overlap in variables, each paper addresses unique hypotheses, is based on different theoretical perspectives, and makes a conceptually unique contribution.

telephone number, the number of different telephone lines through which the household could be reached, and the number of eligible adults in the household. The weights further adjust for differential non-response and are post-stratified to population totals obtained from the Current Population Survey (Bowler & Morisi, 2006) for the months during which the present study was in the field.

Participant characteristics

Respondent (i.e. population) characteristics are described with weighted means and percentages. Of the participants, 51.7% were men. Furthermore, 69.4% were White, 12.8% were Black, 9.0% were Hispanic and 8.8% were of other racial/ethnic makeup. The average age of the participants was 40 years. In terms of highest level of education, 0.2% did not attend high school; 4.3% attended high school but did not graduate; 19.4% graduated from high school or obtained a GED; 3.1% attended trade, technical, or vocational training beyond high school; 20.1% attended some college; 9.2% received an Associate’s degree; 22.3% received a Bachelor’s degree; 2.9% attended some graduate school; 14.3% received a Master’s degree; and 4.2% received a doctoral level degree. Median family income was \$65,000. On average, the participants worked 40.5 h per week and held their present job for 5.3 years.

Measures

Descriptive statistics for and correlations among all study variables are provided in Table I. Each of the variables is described later.

Passive leadership was assessed with five items—two items were adapted from Den Hartog, Van Muijen, and Koopman (1997), two from Pearce and Sims (2002) and one item was developed for this study. The items were: *Your supervisor ...tends to be unavailable when staff need help with a problem; ...waits until things have gone wrong before taking action; ...delays taking action until problems become serious; ...avoids making decisions; and ...avoids getting involved when important issues arise.* Response anchors ranged from

1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistency reliability was 0.90.

Role overload was assessed with three commonly used items (Lisle, van Veldhoven, & Moors, 1998; Spector & Jex, 1998). An example item is *During the past 12 months, how often did you have too much work to do?* Response anchors for each item ranged from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*everyday*). Internal consistency reliability was 0.86.

Role conflict was assessed with three items—two items from Peterson *et al.* (1995) and one item from House, Schuler and Levanoni (1983). An example item is *I often receive conflicting requests from two or more people at work.* Response anchors ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistency reliability was 0.86.

Role ambiguity was assessed with four items developed by House *et al.* (1983). An example item is *My job has clear goals and objectives.* Response anchors ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). All role ambiguity items were reverse scored. Internal consistency reliability was 0.82.

Psychological work fatigue was assessed with the mental and emotional fatigue scales from the Three-Dimensional Work Fatigue Inventory (Frone & Tidwell, 2015). Mental and emotional work fatigue were each assessed with six items that were commensurate across the two dimensions of work fatigue. Example items are: *During the past 12 months, how often did you feel mentally exhausted at the end of the workday?* and *During the past 12 months, how often did you want to emotionally shut down at the end of the workday?* Response anchors ranged from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*everyday*). The scale scores for mental and emotional work fatigues were used as indicators for a latent psychological work fatigue variable. For the correlation matrix presented in Table I, the two scale scores were averaged into a composite psychological work fatigue variable. Internal consistency reliability was 0.95 for mental work fatigue, 0.95 for emotional work fatigue, and 0.97 for the composite psychological work fatigue measure.

Mental health was assessed with three indicators. The first two indicators were from a two-item measure

Table I. Descriptive statistics and correlations for model constructs (weighted)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Passive leadership	1.95	0.89	—						
2. Role overload	2.11	1.28	0.27	—					
3. Role conflict	2.58	0.97	0.37	0.34	—				
4. Role ambiguity	1.50	0.60	0.38	0.24	0.32	—			
5. Psychological work fatigue	1.48	1.04	0.23	0.40	0.26	0.21	—		
6. Mental health	3.09	0.72	−0.17	−0.15	−0.14	−0.17	−0.41	—	
7. Overall work attitude	3.16	0.80	−0.42	−0.17	−0.26	−0.33	−0.21	0.24	—

Note: n = 2467. All correlations are significant at p < 0.001.

of mental health developed by Frone (2007), which was based on approaches commonly used in epidemiological and public health research to represent both absolute and relative ratings of health. The two items were: *In general, would you say your mental or emotional health is poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent?* and *In general, compared to most (men/women) of your age, is your mental or emotional health much worse, somewhat worse, about the same, somewhat better, or much better?* For both of these items, the responses were scored from 1 (*poor or much worse*) to 5 (*excellent or much better*). The third indicator represented a scale score obtained by averaging reports of the frequency of experiencing three depressive symptoms—being depressed, sad, and gloomy. Response anchors for the depressive experiences ranged from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*often*). The measure of depressive symptoms was reverse scored so that high scores represent better mental health (low depression). Internal consistency reliability for the overall mental health measure was 0.77.

Overall work attitude. Job satisfaction was assessed with three items developed by Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983). An example item is *All in all, I am satisfied with my job*. Organizational affective commitment was assessed with three items developed by Meyer and Allen (1997). An example item is *This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me*. Response anchors ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Following Harrison, Newman and Roth (2006) and Schat and Frone (2011), the scale scores for job satisfaction and organizational commitment were used as indicators for a latent overall work attitude variable. For the correlation matrix presented in Table I, the two scale scores were averaged into an overall work attitude variable. Internal consistency reliability was 0.91 for job satisfaction, 0.88 for

organizational commitment and 0.93 for the overall work attitude measure.

Data analysis

The latent variable structural model (Figure 1) was analysed using MPLUS software (Version 7.4; Muthén & Muthén, 2015, Muthén & Muthén 3463 Stoner Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90066 USA). A robust weighted least squares estimator (WLSMV) was used to accommodate the sampling weights and the mix of continuous and ordinal manifest indicator variables (Asparouhov, 2005; Muthen & Muthen, 2015). Model fit was assessed with the χ^2 statistic, comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Based on recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1989), the following cut-offs were used to indicate adequate model fit: CFI and TLI > 0.95 and RMSEA < 0.06. Chi-square difference testing of nested models was accomplished using a robust chi-square difference test (DIFFTEST) developed for mean and variance adjusted weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimation (Asparouhov & Muthen, 2006). Finally, because the sampling distribution of indirect effects (i.e. a product of two or more coefficients) is non-normal, the significance of the indirect effects was based on bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals using 5000 bootstrap samples (e.g. Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007).

Results

Overall model fit

The hypothesized conceptual model (Figure 1) showed a good fit to the data: $\chi^2 [197, n=2467]=1058.95, p < 0.001; CFI=0.97; TLI=0.96; \text{ and } RMSEA=0.042$

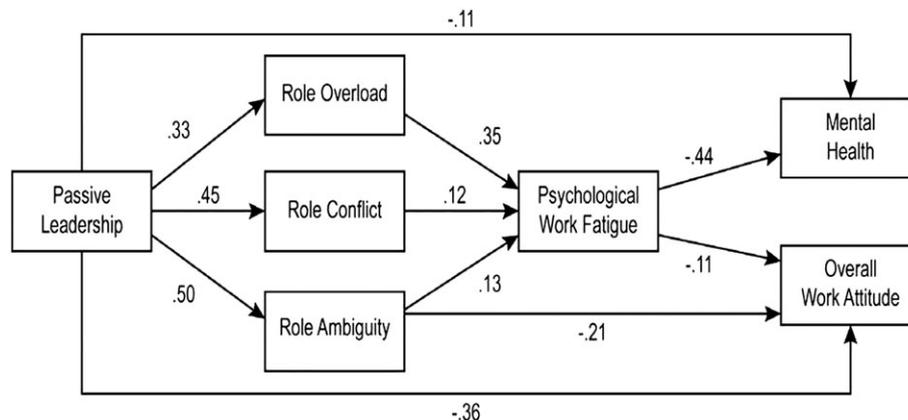


Figure 2. Structural equation modelling results for the revised conceptual model (weighted). $n = 2467$. Standardized path coefficients are shown. To simplify presentation of the model, the standardized factor loadings for the latent variables are shown in Table II. Correlations among the latent mediator and between the latent outcome variables are shown in Table III. All path coefficients are significant at $p < 0.001$

(90% CI (0.040, 0.045)]. Nonetheless, because the model contained nine direct paths constrained to equal zero, modification indices were examined to determine whether or not these constraints were reasonable. As a result, three constrained relationships were freed—passive leadership to mental health, passive leadership to overall work attitude and role ambiguity to overall work attitude. A robust chi-square difference test showed that the revised conceptual model (Figure 2) fit better than that hypothesized conceptual model shown in Figure 1 [$\Delta\chi^2(3, n = 2467) = 174.21, p < 0.001$]. Also, the revised conceptual model showed an excellent overall fit to the data: $\chi^2(194, n = 2467) = 569.53, p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.98; and RMSEA = 0.028 [90% CI (0.025, 0.031)]. The paths that were freed indicate that (a) the role stressors and psychological fatigue only partially mediated the relationship of passive leadership to both mental health and overall work attitude and (b) psychological fatigue only partially mediated the relationship of role ambiguity to overall work attitude.

Parameter estimates

Parameter estimates for the revised structural equation model are presented in Tables II–IV and Figure 2. Table II presents the factor loadings for each of the latent variables. These results indicate that the 22 indicator variables loaded highly and

Table III. Correlations among the latent variables (weighted)

Parameter	Correlations [†]
Latent mediator variables	
Role overload—role conflict	0.30
Role overload—role ambiguity	0.17
Role conflict—role ambiguity	0.25
Latent outcome variables	
Mental health—overall work attitude	0.18

Note: $n = 2467$.

[†]All correlations significant at $p < 0.001$.

significantly on their respective latent variable. Table III presents the correlations among the latent role stressors variables and between the latent mental health and overall work attitude variables. The results show that the role stressors were significantly and positively interrelated as was mental health and overall work attitude.

Figure 2 presents the standardized estimates for the direct relationships that comprised the revised conceptual model, and Table IV presents the standardized indirect relationships of passive leadership to psychological fatigue and the standardized indirect relationships of the role stressors and passive leadership to mental health and overall work attitude. The results in Figure 2 show that passive leadership was positively

Table II. Standardized factor loadings for the substantive model (weighted)

Factors	Standardized factor loadings [†]	Factors	Standardized factor loadings [†]
Passive leadership		Mental health	
Item 1	0.78	Item 1	0.92
Item 2	0.91	Item 2	0.77
Item 3	0.92	Low depressive symptoms	0.67
Item 4	0.86	Overall work attitude	
Item 5	0.87	Job satisfaction	0.92
Role overload		Organizational commitment	0.73
Item 1	0.84		
Item 2	0.91		
Item 3	0.88		
Role conflict			
Item 1	0.83		
Item 2	0.87		
Item 3	0.91		
Role ambiguity			
Item 1	0.81		
Item 2	0.83		
Item 3	0.82		
Item 4	0.87		
Psychological work fatigue			
Mental work fatigue	0.82		
Emotional work fatigue	0.91		

Note: $n = 2467$

[†]All factor loadings significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table IV. Standardized total effects, direct effects, total indirect effects and specific indirect effects for psychological fatigue, mental health and overall work attitude (weighted)

Effects	Psychological fatigue β (95% BC CI)	Mental health β (95% BC CI)	Overall work attitude β (95% BC CI)
Passive leadership			
Total effect	0.234 (0.190, 0.280)	-0.215 (-0.276, -0.153)	-0.488 (-0.553, -0.428)
Direct effect	0 [†]	-0.112 (-0.174, -0.049)	-0.358 (-0.462, -0.270)
Total indirect effect	0.234 (0.190, 0.280)	-0.103 (-0.133, -0.078)	-0.130 (-0.178, -0.081)
Specific indirect effects:			
Via role overload	0.116 (0.088, 0.151)		
Via role conflict	0.052 (0.018, 0.088)		
Via role ambiguity	0.066 (0.026, 0.109)		-0.103 (-0.151, -0.055)
Via role overload and psychological work fatigue		-0.051 (-0.071, -0.037)	-0.013 (-0.024, -0.005)
Via role conflict and psychological work fatigue		-0.023 (-0.039, -0.008)	-0.006 (-0.014, -0.001)
Via role ambiguity and psychological work fatigue		-0.029 (-0.051, -0.011)	-0.007 (-0.017, -0.002)
Role overload			
Total effect		-0.153 (-0.197, -0.115)	-0.040 (-0.068, -0.014)
Direct effect		0 [†]	0 [†]
Total indirect effect via psychological work fatigue		-0.153 (-0.197, -0.115)	-0.040 (-0.068, -0.014)
Role conflict			
Total effect		-0.051 (-0.085, -0.017)	-0.013 (-0.031, -0.003)
Direct effect		0 [†]	0 [†]
Total indirect effect via psychological work fatigue		-0.051 (-0.085, -0.017)	-0.013 (-0.031, -0.003)
Role ambiguity			
Total effect		-0.058 (-0.101, -0.023)	-0.224 (-0.307, -0.132)
Direct effect		0 [†]	-0.209 (-0.294, -0.115)
Total indirect effect via psychological work fatigue		-0.058 (-0.101, -0.023)	-0.015 (-0.033, -0.004)

Note: $n = 2467$. β , standardized effects. BC CI, bias corrected confidence interval. The bias corrected confidence intervals for all effects in this table were based on 5000 bootstrap samples.

[†]Direct effect constrained to equal zero.

related to role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. Supporting Hypothesis 2, each of the role stressors was positively and independently related to psychological work fatigue. Supporting Hypothesis 3, psychological work fatigue was negatively related to mental health and overall work attitude. Finally, the revised model in Figure 2 shows that passive leadership was directly and negatively related to both mental health and overall work attitude and that role ambiguity was directly and negatively related to overall work attitude.

Turning to the indirect relationships, Table IV shows that role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity were each negatively and indirectly related to mental health and overall work attitude via psychological work fatigue. These findings support Hypothesis 4. The results in Table IV and Figure 2 also show that the relationships of role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity to mental health were fully mediated by psychological work fatigue. Similarly, the relationships of role overload and role conflict to overall work attitude were fully mediated by psychological work fatigue. In contrast, psychological work fatigue only partially mediated the relationship between role ambiguity and overall work attitude. The results in Figure 2 and

Table IV show that passive leadership was indirectly related to psychological work fatigue via the three role stressors. More importantly, and supporting Hypothesis 5, the total indirect relationships for passive leadership show that it was negatively and indirectly related to both mental health ($\beta = -0.103$, $p < 0.05$) and overall work attitude ($\beta = -0.130$, $p < 0.05$) via the sequential paths involving the role stressors and psychological work fatigue. Table IV also shows that each of the six individual indirect paths linking passive leadership to the two well-being outcomes via role stressors and psychological work fatigue were negative and statistically significant. However, because the revised model included significant direct paths from passive leadership to both mental health and overall work attitude, role stressors and psychological work fatigue only partially mediated the overall relationships. Finally, comparing the size of the total indirect effects to total effects, shown in Table IV, reveals that the indirect relations involving the role stressors and psychological work fatigue explained 47.9% ($-0.103/-0.215$) of the relationship between passive leadership and mental health and 26.6% ($-0.130/-0.488$) of the relationship between passive leadership and overall work attitude.

Discussion

Building from role stress and COR theories, a conceptual model was developed and revised (Figure 2) outlining the direct and indirect relations of passive leadership to employee well-being. Overall, the results support four general findings. Firstly, passive leadership is directly related to a poor work environment, as reflected in its positive relation to three types of role stressors. Secondly, passive leadership is directly and/or indirectly related to several types of employee harm—higher levels of psychological work fatigue and poorer mental health and overall work attitude. Thirdly, the total and direct relationships between passive leadership and overall work attitude were stronger than the total and direct relationships between passive leadership and mental health, respectively. Fourthly, the role stressors and psychological work fatigue partially mediated the relationship of passive leadership to both mental health and overall work attitude. However, the indirect relations involving role stressors and psychological work fatigue explained a larger proportion of the relationship between passive leadership and mental health (47.9%) than the relationship between passive leadership and overall work attitude (26.6%).

Although the *post-hoc* addition of three direct paths to the conceptual model should be considered as tentative until replicated, they are conceptually reasonable and were based on a large probability sample of U.S. workers. The direct relationship from role ambiguity to overall work attitude suggests that, compared to role overload and role conflict, role ambiguity may undermine work attitudes directly or that its relationship to work attitudes involves some other mediating mechanism in addition to psychological work fatigue. Likewise, the direct relationships of passive leadership to mental health and overall work attitude may suggest that passive leadership is sufficiently detrimental to directly influence employee well-being or that the proposed model needs to be expanded to include other mediator variables.

In addition to the specific findings just summarized, this study more generally provides support for role stress and COR theories. Role stress theory suggests role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload are unique and individually important constructs. Nonetheless, prior research often studies the three role stressors in isolation. By simultaneously modelling all three role stressors, this study revealed that each of them plays an important role—passive leadership was positively related to all three role stressors and each role stressor was positively and directly related to psychological work fatigue. In terms of COR theory, a central hypothesized process linking work stressors to stress outcomes is resource depletion. Despite the underlying assumption that work stressors and various outcomes are indirectly linked via resource depletion, past research often fails to directly test this assumption.

Adding to this literature, this study provides support for a key tenet of COR theory by showing that passive leadership and three role stressors were indirectly related to poor employee well-being via psychological work fatigue, which directly reflects psychological resource depletion at work.

Study strengths and weaknesses

The present results should be interpreted within the context of the strengths and limitations of this study. In terms of strengths, this study used a large and broad probability sample of US employees, which would provide more variation in the constructs than smaller convenience samples. Further, compared with typical convenience samples, the present sample provided adequate statistical power to detect the hypothesized effects and provide more accurate estimates of population effect sizes (e.g. Ioannidis, 2005, 2008).

These strengths notwithstanding, the present study has two potential weaknesses. The first limitation is that although the results were consistent with theoretical expectations, the present cross-sectional data do not lend themselves to strong inferences regarding the direction of causal effects because they cannot rule out reverse or reciprocal relations. Although the present model should be replicated with longitudinal data, prior research provides some support for the hypothesized causal direction proposed in the model. For example, using a large nationally representative sample in Norway, Skogstad *et al.* (2014) showed that (a) *laissez faire* leadership predicted role ambiguity at three later time points (with time lags of 2 and 3 years, respectively) and (b) role ambiguity did not predict later reports of *laissez faire* leadership. Moreover, Chênevert *et al.* (2013) showed that the effects of initial passive leadership on affective commitment measured 3 years later was fully mediated by role ambiguity, although they did not test for reverse causality.

A second limitation is that collecting all data from a single source may result in common methods variance (CMV). Although it is generally assumed that CMV can inflate construct relations relative to the true population effect, CMV can lead to deflated construct relations as well (e.g. Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). In order to minimize processes that lead to CMV, such as consistency biases, demand characteristics and social desirability biases, the present study incorporated several suggested procedural remedies to minimize the likelihood of CMV occurring (e.g. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012): (a) confidentiality of responses was assured and no information was collected in terms of where the participants were employed; (b) interviewer training included building rapport with participants; (c) the measures and items, as well as the number of response options, were selected or developed to minimize the cognitive demands of the survey; (d) the focal measures in the present

analyses used several different response formats and were separated within and across sections of a larger questionnaire by assessments of other constructs; and (e) the survey was interviewer-administered over the telephone, which can reduce response consistency by making prior responses physically unavailable and less likely to be available in short-term memory, and minimize stylistic and careless responding.

Directions for future research

The results of the current study suggest several directions for future research on passive leadership and its consequences. Firstly, more research should be devoted to construct and measurement development. The most widely referenced/used construct is *laissez faire* leadership, which reflects an undifferentiated and unintentional lack of leader response. Hinkin and Schriesheim (2007) brought greater conceptual clarity by introducing the constructs of reward omission and punishment omission as possible supervisory non-responses to performance, showing that they uniquely predicted perceived supervisor effectiveness, satisfaction with the supervisor and role clarity after controlling for *laissez faire* leadership. However, they also showed that reward and punishment omission and *laissez faire* leadership were distinct constructs. Thus, passive leadership may represent a multidimensional construct composed of general and more specific dimensions.

Secondly, research on role stressors generally focuses on role ambiguity and role conflict simultaneously, without considering role overload in the set of role stressors. Yet all three role stressors played a mediating role in linking passive leadership to employee well-being. Given this finding and the positive associations among the three role stressors, future research should assess and model the three role stressors simultaneously.

Thirdly, because the three role stressors and psychological work fatigue only partially mediated the negative relation of passive leadership to mental health and work attitudes, research should consider other pathways through which passive leadership might exert its negative effects on employee well-being. For example, having a leader who ignores requests for assistance, fails to provide feedback, encouragement or even punishment, would suggest to employees that they are not an integral part of the organization and that their work is not important, thus thwarting needs for belongingness (e.g. Twenge, Baumeister, Tice & Stucke, 2001) and meaningfulness (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007) that are critical for psychological well-being. Moreover, failing to show an interest in employees' performance, especially when it is of a high quality, could compromise the development of positive self-efficacy beliefs that are central to subsequent performance (e.g. Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Thus, future research might focus on belongingness, meaningfulness and self-efficacy as additional mediating variables.

Fourthly, while the available literature points to the negative effects of passive leadership, it would be premature to assume that all employees respond to passive leadership in the same way. For example, employees with a higher need for personal growth (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) may view passive leadership as an opportunity for learning and development, thereby moderating (i.e. reducing) any of the negative influences of passive leadership on the three role stressors, mental health, or overall work attitude that we found in this study. Therefore, until research explores possible conditional effects involving passive leadership, we cannot exclude the possibility that passive leadership might exert positive outcomes. Future research should investigate the role of the need for personal growth, as well as other possible moderators such as personal resilience, on the effects of passive leadership.

Finally, research needs to explore the relationship of passive leadership to motivational outcomes and work performance. One issue that might be explored is whether inactive and passive leaders fail to elicit high levels of motivation and employee engagement, thereby resulting in lower levels of task performance, fewer citizenship behaviours, and an increased likelihood of various types of organizational deviance. In addition, controlled laboratory studies might investigate the possible link between passive leadership and objective measures of work performance while manipulating different conceptualizations of passive leadership, such as *laissez faire* leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) or reward and punishment omission (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008). The conceptual model developed in this study outlines a set of processes that would be useful in exploring all these questions.

Practical implications

Earlier, we drew attention to the fact that the nature and consequences of passive leadership have largely been ignored by researchers. Based on Avolio et al.'s (2009) analysis of leadership intervention research, we suggest that a similar situation exists regarding practical leadership development initiatives, where most leadership interventions would be concentrated on helping leaders acquire positive behaviours, without making leaders aware of their negative behaviours. Our findings and those of others (e.g. Skogstad *et al.*, 2014) indicate that formal management and leadership development programmes should explicitly include a focus on the nature and mostly negative effects of passive leadership styles. For this to happen, lessons about the negative effects of passive leadership need to be shared with those charged with leadership training and with decisions about organizational leadership.

Conclusion

This study shows that passive leadership may have a deleterious relationship with employee well-being. Part

of its negative relationship is indirect—passive leadership may result in a negative work environment that depletes employees' psychological resources, which then results in poorer mental health and work

attitudes. Therefore, management needs to be made aware of the potential deleterious effects resulting from a passive leadership style. As noted earlier, employee exposure to passive leadership is not rare.

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