

# How Bottom-Line Mentality Leads to Abusive Supervision? Investigating the Mediating Effects of Anxiety

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**Purpose:** By integrating the theory of workplace anxiety with a self-regulatory theory, this study investigates the mediating role of workplace anxiety in the relationship between leader bottom-line mentality and abusive supervision targeting the follower, as well as the moderating effect of rules climate on leaders' emotion-behavior process.

**Methods:** A total of 393 employees and 91 supervising managers participated in the multi-source, two-wave survey. To test our hypotheses, we performed the regression analysis and conducted bootstrapping analyses using the Hayes PROCESS Model.

**Results:** Findings indicated that leader bottom-line mentality has a positive indirect relationship with abusive supervision via workplace anxiety. In addition, rules climate weakens abusive supervision for workplace anxiety, revealing a significant moderate effect.

**Conclusion:** Leaders with high BLM encapsulate apprehension and tension, which are deficient in fostering workplace anxiety as an important affect process that facilitates abusive supervision. During this process, we identify rules climate as an important boundary condition for our model and theorization.

**Keywords:** bottom-line mentality, workplace anxiety, abusive supervision, rules climate, self-regulation

Bottom-line mentality (BLM) defines as “one-dimensional thinking that revolves around securing bottom-line outcomes to the neglect of competing priorities”.<sup>1,2</sup> Bottom-line outcomes are typically financial in nature, and the competing priorities can include things such as moral and social norms, employee welfare, work quality, or justice concerns.<sup>1-3</sup> Despite it is ubiquitous in the workplace, prior research has predominantly linked it to undesirable or dysfunctional outcomes such as withdrawal from helping others,<sup>4,5</sup> decrease in personal performance,<sup>6</sup> and engagement in social undermining<sup>1</sup> or unethical pro-leader behavior.<sup>7-9</sup>

Although the burgeoning research on BLM has helped to establish a solid foundation,<sup>10-12</sup> more work is needed to advance the BLM literature in specific ways. Nearly all of the empirical studies of BLM have focused on interpersonal process of BLM on other individuals, such as coworkers or subordinates.<sup>1,7,13</sup> However, applications of these evidences seldom depict how leaders' reaction to this belief translates into their leader behaviors. Furthermore, leader behaviors reflect their attributes and attitudes,<sup>14</sup> exploring whether and how leader BLM influences one's affect and behavior, which is vitally important to organizational function.<sup>15</sup> Leaders use different patterns of behavior to achieve their goals when influencing others. Enterprise leader behaviors are the characteristics of a habituated leadership style, which is gradually formed in long-term personal experience and work environment, and consciously or unconsciously plays a stable role in leadership practice, with a strong personalized color. The theoretical value and practical significance of BLM research lies in that it can better predict the actual leader behaviors and explain how and why the form of this leader behavior.

Accordingly, our goal in this study is to provide a more balanced, or functional, view of the leader BLM concept. To do so, we draw on the theory of workplace anxiety (TWA)<sup>16</sup> to first adopt workplace anxiety to explain the indirect

relationships between leader BLM and corresponding leader behaviors at work in the forms of abusive supervision, which is defined as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact”.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, leaders high in BLM tend to develop a narrow and also competitive mindset, prompting them to realize the scarcity of valuable resources.<sup>2,18</sup> While they put their own reputation and personal success as the first priority, other people are viewed as competitors for work accolades.<sup>1,19</sup> To ensure that they will eventually stand out, people high in BLM will pay close attention to monitoring their own performance and cues about those of others,<sup>20,21</sup> which not only leads to a strong sense of workplace anxiety<sup>16</sup> but also jeopardizes their ability to control their emotions and behaviors,<sup>22</sup> nudging them to be rude and even abusive at work. That is, workplace anxiety services as an important intrapersonal process that facilitates abusive supervision.

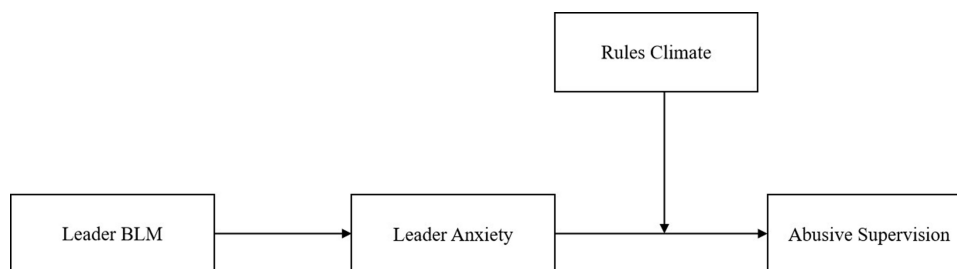
Then, we draw on the self-regulatory theory to explore which managers may react more abusively when working under workplace anxiety.<sup>23</sup> Such knowledge can prepare organizations for supporting leaders who may enable the perils of BLM and workplace anxiety to cascade top-down toward their own followers. Obviously, the answer is related to features of the immediate work environment, which shapes the fundamental processes leading to managerial thinking and actions. Rules climate means to what extent people think it is important to conform to organizational rules to deal at work and deal with ethical dilemmas.<sup>24</sup> By integrating TWA with self-regulatory theory, we thus predict rules climate to mitigate the burden and anxiety activated by BLM such that leaders are less likely to abuse their own followers at work. Figure 1 presents our overall conceptual model.

Consequently, our research entails two major contributions. First, contrary to previous research,<sup>1,7,13</sup> which largely assumed that individuals with high BLM behave immorally to protect their own benefits and sacrifice those of others, our study ascribes reasons for resource depletion of intrapersonal process such that whether and how BLM leaders react dysfunctionally based on more sensitive and vigilant in their surroundings and themselves.<sup>20,21</sup> This work is noteworthy because it reveals the underlying reasons why individuals with BLM behave in an unethical and even immoral manner. Additionally, the present understanding of the nomological network of BLM study is expanded by our justification and findings.

Second, our theoretical model advances knowledge of how emotions influence unethical and antisocial behavior at work. Indeed, prior studies have demonstrated how negative affect may strengthen an individual’s propensity to behave morally.<sup>7</sup> Our model contributes to this discussion by highlighting why and how emotions such as anxiety might encourage and motivate unethical behavior, especially for people such as middle managers. During this process, we identify rules climate as an important boundary condition for our model and theorization. This knowledge also has practical implications as it can inform firms and organizations of how to develop effective programs and practices to support middle managers, especially if they might be high in BLM.

## Theory and Hypotheses

The term bottom-line mentality refers to one-dimensional thinking that is focused on attaining bottom-line outcomes at the expense of competing goals<sup>1</sup> and whatever “is worth paying attention to while everything else is discarded”.<sup>2</sup> Securing certain bottom-line results is typically seen as improving organizational profitability<sup>25,26</sup> and is frequently a



**Figure 1** Conceptual Model.

need for individual awards.<sup>27–30</sup> However, when individuals regard it as if it is the only goal worth pursuing, concentrating on the bottom line may become troublesome.<sup>2,31</sup>

Furthermore, people face the risk of treating the bottom line like a competition when they use a BLM in multivalent circumstances.<sup>2,32</sup> They can only succeed by ensuring the bottom line; any other result is viewed as a failure. These people, in turn, approach the bottom line as if their activities have only limited ramifications—winning the bottom line is the only meaningful outcome, while the actual ramifications of their actions or the actual people who might be injured stay psychologically remote from their consciousness.<sup>31,33</sup>

## BLM and Leader Anxiety

According to the theory of workplace anxiety, workplace anxiety can be defined as “feelings of nervousness, uneasiness, and tension about job-related performance”.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to general trait anxiety, workplace anxiety falls into an intermediate category, similar to test anxiety<sup>34</sup> or athletic performance anxiety.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, workplace anxiety is typically understood and studied at two different levels: as a temporary state or as a broader evaluation of one’s work.<sup>16</sup> The temporary state is known as situational workplace anxiety and is influenced by factors that vary frequently, such as job type, job demands, and job autonomy, as well as task demands, organizational needs, and emotional labor demands.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, dispositional workplace anxiety refers to a more stable form of anxiety and is influenced by more enduring factors like gender, age, job tenure, core self-evaluation, and physical health.<sup>16</sup>

While dispositional workplace anxiety is commonly studied as a trait exhibited by individuals, situational anxiety is typically examined as a temporary state experienced by individuals. Moreover, there is a reciprocal relationship between dispositional workplace anxiety and situational workplace anxiety. Individuals with high dispositional anxiety tend to be more sensitive to situational stressors, making them more susceptible to experiencing situational anxiety. Conversely, the accumulation of situational anxiety experiences can contribute to the development of dispositional anxiety over time.<sup>16</sup> In the current study, we focus on within-individual differences in situational workplace anxiety as a function of the BLM (or lack thereof) in a leader’s organization.

Drawing from the theory of workplace anxiety,<sup>16</sup> we argue that BLM is likely to be a source of leader’s anxiety for two reasons. First and most directly, a high level of BLM may indicate task demands, such as tight deadlines, higher workloads, and ambiguous tasks, which add to anxiety at work.<sup>16,36,37</sup> These requirements show that there is uncertainty about completing deadlines and role expectations, which may introduce potential threats to individuals. High task demands exacerbate individual anxiety since workplace anxiety is a reflection of individual cognitions (eg, BLM). Additionally, leaders provide a mental model of success at work in which their own achievement could only be at the expense of others.<sup>1,2</sup> That is BLM, which places a heavy strain on leaders by pushing them to prioritize profit before all else.<sup>2,38</sup> In other words, they internalize the idea that pursuing one’s own interests and ambitions over those of others necessitates competitive and forceful conduct.<sup>33</sup> BLM-induced business cultures that are competitive and quick-paced have been reported to cause significant amounts of workplace anxiety.<sup>16,39</sup> Still, lack of job security and office politics due to BLM are likely to activate workplace anxiety.<sup>40</sup>

Second, leaders consider that their efforts associated with BLM should be tied to outcomes.<sup>41</sup> Failure to live up to their expectations may jeopardize the leaders’ standing and reputation within the company and lessen the respect of the subordinates. Continuing distorted belief may raise concerns about performing at high levels that are necessary to keep one’s status because continued employment is typically dependent on performing up to expectations.<sup>33</sup> As in the previous conceptual work, the bottom-line mentality has alluded to the potentially dysfunctional nature.<sup>2,3,42–46</sup> Such beliefs arise from the natural conflict between one’s self-interests and those of others in achievement contexts, such as while competing with others or on the job.<sup>47</sup>

In sum, BLM increases leaders’ tension and apprehension, which may trigger leaders’ self-protective coping strategies like anxiety. Consistent with the notion of literature on anxiety emphasizes the role of the beliefs in the experience of anxiety: dysfunctional beliefs—such as BLM—trigger high levels of anxiety,<sup>48–51</sup> we posit that BLM will have a particularly problematic impact on leaders’ workplace anxiety. We thus offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Leader BLM is positively related to leader’s workplace anxiety.

## Mediating Role of Anxiety

Having established the impact of BLM on leader anxiety, we turn next to the question of how these leaders' anxieties are transformed into abusive supervisory behaviors. Due to the exceptionally high demands of BLM, which frequently become habits and call for people to use a variety of cognitive and personal resources, such as attention, effort, and persistence, leaders may find these demands overwhelming and feel exhausted,<sup>52</sup> which could make it more difficult for them to exercise the necessary self-regulation to control their behavior.<sup>53</sup> The idea that leaders actively control their behavior is in line with the self-regulation hypothesis, which places a strong focus on people's capacity to drive their own goal-directed behaviors and activities by establishing their own standards and tracking their progress toward these goals.<sup>54,55</sup> We suggest that the self-regulation theory offers a suitable lens for understanding abusive supervision because it has been shown to help investigate organizational phenomena.

Self-regulation theory helps individuals maintain appropriate behavior by giving them the resources they need to manage their behavior and adhere to socially acceptable standards.<sup>23,54</sup> Acting civilly demands executive control and effort, therefore maintaining decent behavior necessitates a reservoir of self-resources.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, a depleted state of self-regulation renders individuals worn out to control and monitor their behavior to adhere to acceptable standards.<sup>57,58</sup> Depleted leaders are less able to enforce reasonable expectations for interpersonal behavior, which encourages unethical behavior.<sup>59</sup> In other words, BLM depletes self-resources, and leaders who are not able to manage their behavior will behave abusively against subordinates. A growing body of studies indicates that a high degree of BLM may encourage people to behave unethically.<sup>1,4,6,7,38</sup> In a similar vein, pertinent studies have demonstrated that priming references to money and wealth encourage unethical behavior.<sup>60,61</sup> Drawing on this body of research, we suggest that leaders with BLMs try to ensure the bottom line even while they are unable to notice the ethical ramifications of their choices, encouraging "ethical fading".<sup>31</sup> Leaders are more likely to behave unethically toward their subordinates due to the disparity of status and power represented by the leader's role.

Consistent with the notion of the TWA<sup>16</sup> and related anxiety research,<sup>62</sup> anxiety indicates the cues of threaten, even though that threat is frequently nebulous and challenging to identify. Individuals use a variety of behavioral, psychological, and physiological strategies to regulate their anxiety.<sup>63</sup> Individuals focus their attention on threat cues when they are anxious. When a threat is present, the brain shifts its cognitive resources to ward it off. They consequently frequently prioritize their own desires while ignoring the needs of others.<sup>62</sup> Research findings across several disciplines provide preliminary support for this argument. For example, feelings of anxiety, stress, and frustration have been consistently linked to abusive supervision.<sup>64–66</sup> Taken together, the evidence thus suggests an indirect effect whereby BLMs increase abusive supervision, mediated by workplace anxiety.

Hypothesis 2. Leader BLM is positively related to abusive supervision via leader's workplace anxiety.

## Moderating Role of Rules Climate

Self-regulation is the ability to change one's own behavior. It significantly boosts human behavior's adaptability and flexibility, allowing individuals to change their conduct in response to a wide range of social and environmental circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, modifying one's conduct in order to adhere to laws, uphold principles, or pursue objectives is a (good) sort of self-regulation. The need for social acceptance is the primary source of motivational conflict in these conflicts between innate impulses and contextual demands.<sup>67</sup> A contextual cue is a crucial moderator in one's control over what transpires at work since "self-regulation is a controlled process".<sup>53</sup> Strong situations establish unambiguous rules for behavior, limit the expression of scruples, and so reduce the detrimental impact on subsequent behavior (eg, rules climate).<sup>68,69</sup> By applying this reasoning, we suggest that leaders who think that external factors (eg, high-rules climate) are driving events within their organization are more likely to exercise restraint. Contrarily, those who feel they have no control over occurrences due to the environment (eg, low-rules climate) are more likely to engage in their desired unethical behavior. Therefore, the effect of leader BLM on anxiety and subsequent abusive supervision could fluctuate under different conditions.

We propose that the presence of an ethical work climate plays a crucial role in determining whether leaders with a bottom-line mentality exhibit abusive supervision or refrain from doing so. An ethical work climate refers to a subset of

psychological work climates that focuses on the perception of morally right behavior within the organization,<sup>24</sup> which provides clear signals regarding the expected and accepted ethical conduct in the workplace.<sup>70</sup> We argue that when an unethical work climate prevails, signaling that the use of unethical practices for achieving goals is acceptable or even appropriate, leaders with a high BLM are more likely to engage in opportunistic and destructive behavior.

Specifically, drawing from self-regulation theory, we contend that an unethical psychological work climate characterized by a low emphasis on conforming to company policies and regulations, known as a low-rules climate, is conducive to the expression of BLM.<sup>24</sup> In such a climate, where adherence to rules is not given much consideration, there are ample opportunities for leaders to engage in hierarchical mistreatment to serve their self-interest. Additionally, a low-rules climate where individuals are willing and able to disregard morality and exploit others to achieve personal ends also serves as a cue for the manifestation of BLM.<sup>24</sup> In these unethical psychological work climates, leaders with BLM are not only capable but also encouraged to employ any means available to pursue selfish goals and engage in abusive supervision, as such self-centered and harsh behaviors are considered acceptable and aligned with the norm.<sup>71</sup>

In rules climate, adherence to corporate rules is the primary factor taken into account when resolving moral dilemmas.<sup>72</sup> To be specific, in a high-rules workplace climate, individuals are expected to adhere completely to the policies and practices of their employer with minimal latitude for employing alternative (unethical) means or behaviors.<sup>24</sup> We argue that this climate is crucial in preventing unpleasant emotions from influencing inappropriate behavior, and we propose that it is particularly important for lowering unethical behavior (eg, abusive supervision).

In contrast, anxiety should have a more significant impact on unethical behavior in a context where abiding by corporate laws and rules is not as important or a low-rules climate.<sup>24</sup> In a context that places less emphasis on following rules and regulations, it is easier to take shortcuts, bend the rules for one's benefit, and abuse subordinates to relieve anxiety.<sup>71</sup> We propose that high anxiety will take advantage of the greater room for misbehavior in environments with lax regulations. As a result, in a low-rules climate, anxious leaders are more prone to act erratically and engage in coping mechanisms, which increases the likelihood that their subordinates may view them as abusive supervisors. We, therefore, expect a moderate effect of rules climate on the relationship between leaders' anxiety and abusive supervision.

**Hypothesis 3.** Rules climate mitigates the positive relationship between leaders' anxiety and abusive supervision such that the relationship becomes weaker when rules climate is high rather than low.

As previously discussed, workplace anxiety may serve as a potential mechanism for explaining the relationship between a leader's BLM and abusive supervision. We propose that by altering the extent to which BLM leader's anxiety affects dysfunctional behavior, rules climate can moderate the indirect effect of leader's BLM on abusive supervision via workplace anxiety.

**Hypothesis 4.** The indirect effect of BLM leaders' workplace anxiety on abusive supervision is moderated by the rules climate, such that when the rules climate is high, the indirect effect is weakened.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

We collected two waves of data from employees and their supervisors working in a large appliance manufacturing company in a major city in southern China. We invited 456 employees and their managers from 103 teams to participate in a voluntary survey on workplace opinions. These employees specialized in a variety of domains, including sales, finance, and quality testing. Before data collection, we ensured that all participants were aware of the voluntary nature of their involvement, the procedures for completing the questionnaires, and the confidentiality of their responses. At Time 1, of 456 invited members in 103 teams, 428 members in 98 teams rated their supervisors' BLM and demographic items. At Time 1, leaders were also sent a survey and were asked to rate anxiety and demographic items. At Time 2, which was 1 month after the completion of the Time 1 survey, we asked those 428 members respondents to rate their leaders' abusive supervision and team rules climate, and 393 members returned their questionnaires.

The final matched sample consisted of 393 employees and 91 leaders, with a response rate of 86.2% for employees and 88.3% for leaders. The average team size was 4.32 employees. Among members, 53.45% were male, and the average age was 34.73 years ( $SD = 9.56$ ). Among supervisors, 64.84% were male, and the average age was 40.03 years ( $SD = 7.35$ ), 36.24% held high school, 47.25% held bachelor's degrees, and the rest held master's degrees or higher.

## Measures

Following the translation-back translation procedure, three bilingual researchers translated all English scales into Chinese. Any disagreement was resolved through further discussion. The translated surveys were also sent to several doctoral students, and small modifications were made based on their feedback. Unless noted otherwise, all responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

### Leader BLM

We measured leader BLM using Greenbaum et al's 4-item scale.<sup>1</sup> A sample item is "supervisor only cares about the business". Cronbach's alpha was 0.93. Individual responses were aggregated to the team level (see below for aggregation statistics).

### Leader Anxiety

Leaders rated their anxiety in the work context over the prior 3 months. Anxiety was assessed with three adjectives from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS),<sup>73</sup> namely distressed, nervous, and jittery. Cronbach's alpha was 0.81.

### Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision was measured using the 15-item version of Tepper's Abusive Supervision Scale by the subordinates.<sup>17</sup> A sample item of the scale is "My supervisor ridicules me." Cronbach's alpha was 0.96. Individual responses were aggregated to the team level (see below for aggregation statistics).

### Rules Climate

Rules climate was measured with the 4-item scale from the Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ).<sup>24,74,75</sup> A sample item of the scale is "It is very important to follow strictly the company's procedures here." Cronbach's alpha was 0.90. Individual responses were aggregated to the team level (see below for aggregation statistics).

### Control Variables

We controlled for supervisors' gender, age, and education level, which have been found to impact leaders' anxiety or tendency to engage in abusive supervision.<sup>16</sup>

## Data Aggregation

Because we were interested in team-level effects, we aggregated individual-level employee responses for group BLM, abusive supervision, and rules climate. Bliese (2000) suggested that researchers meet three requirements to justify aggregation: (a) groups should be naturally occurring in the environment and (b) there should be within-team homogeneity and between-teams heterogeneity.<sup>76</sup> Within our sample, work teams were defined as having three or more employees working together in a department with a unique supervisor. Thus, these teams reflected naturally occurring groups.

We analyzed within-team homogeneity by calculating the mean rwg. Within-team agreement was acceptable for BLM ( $rwg = 0.82$ ), abusive supervision ( $rwg = 0.95$ ), and rules climate ( $rwg = 0.95$ ). Next, we examined between-group heterogeneity by calculating intraclass correlations (ICC) to assess meaningfulness of group membership, or ICC(1), and the reliability of differences between groups, or ICC(2). For BLM, the ICC(1) was 0.35, and the ICC(2) was 0.70. For abusive supervision, the ICC(1) was 0.36, and the ICC(2) was 0.70. The results were similar for abusive supervision with ICC(1) = 0.36 and ICC(2) = 0.70. Although there are no firm standards of acceptability, the rwg, ICC(1) and ICC(2) results are above recommended values ( $rwg \geq 0.70$ ;  $ICC(1) > 0.05$ ;  $ICC(2) > 0.50$ ). Thus, we created aggregated measures of group BLM, abusive supervision, and rules climate.

## Results

### Validity and Reliability

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted a four-factor multi-level confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) by using Mplus 7.4, which includes three individual-level variables—leaders BLM (T1), rules climate (T2), abusive supervision (T2),—and one team-level variable—workplace anxiety (T1). In line with our focus on the distinctiveness of the constructs rather than the interrelationships between items within constructs, we used parceling to conduct the analysis. As shown in Table 1, the results indicated that the model fit the data well ( $\chi^2_{(41)} = 74.91$ , CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR<sub>within</sub> = 0.03, SRMR<sub>between</sub> = 0.00). In addition, the fit indices of the hypothesized model were generally better than those obtained from alternative models. For example, we tested an alternative model in which abusive and BLM were specified to reflect one global factor, which fit the data worse than the hypothesized model ( $\chi^2_{(43)} = 856.66$ , CFI = 0.69, TLI = 0.58, RMSEA = 0.22, SRMR<sub>within</sub> = 0.24, SRMR<sub>between</sub> = 0.00). Then, following the recommendations of the research, we assessed the convergent validity by testing the composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct. According to the results in Table 2, all items' standardized factor loadings were greater than 0.60, and the CR value of each variable was higher than 0.8. In addition, the AVE values for each construct exceeded the threshold value (0.50), suggesting good convergent validity of all variables in the study.

### Hypothesis Testing

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 3. To check for multi-

**Table 1** Model Fit Results for Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Models	$\chi^2$	Df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR <sub>within</sub>	SRMR <sub>between</sub>
1. Four-factors: BLM, LA, AS, RC	74.91	41	0.99	0.98	0.05	0.03	0.00
2. Three-factors: BLM+AS, LA, RC	856.66	43	0.69	0.58	0.22	0.24	0.00
3. Three-factors: BLM+RC, LA, AS	784.95	43	0.72	0.62	0.21	0.21	0.00
4. Three-factors: BLM, LA, AS+RC	755.95	43	0.73	0.63	0.21	0.21	0.00
5. Two-factor: BLM+RC+AS, LA	2007.19	44	0.25	0.02	0.34	0.29	0.00
6. Sing-factor: BLM+RC+AS+LA	2811.70	91	0.24	0.11	0.26	0.25	0.00

Note: N = 91 teams.

Abbreviations: AS, abusive supervision; BLM, bottom-line mentality; LA, leader anxiety; RC, rules climate; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA, root mean squared error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean-square residual.

**Table 2** Factor Loading and Convergent Validity

Variables	Order	Loading Factor	CR	AVE	Variables	Order	Loading Factor	CR	AVE
Bottom-line mentality	Q1	0.89	0.95	0.82	Abusive supervision	Q12	0.69	0.97	0.66
	Q2	0.93				Q13	0.78		
	Q3	0.93				Q14	0.85		
	Q4	0.87				Q15	0.86		
Rules climate	Q5	0.86	0.93	0.76		Q16	0.83		
	Q6	0.91				Q17	0.87		
	Q7	0.87				Q18	0.83		
	Q8	0.85				Q19	0.80		
Anxiety	Q9	0.80	0.88	0.71		Q20	0.74		
	Q10	0.89				Q21	0.82		
	Q11	0.83				Q22	0.85		
						Q23	0.81		
						Q24	0.84		
						Q25	0.81		
						Q26	0.80		

Abbreviations: CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extraction.

**Table 3** Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Leader BLM	2.67	0.73	(0.93)					
2. Leader anxiety	1.75	0.62	0.26*	(0.81)				
3. Rules climate	3.91	0.58	0.08	−0.09	(0.90)			
4. Abusive supervision	1.61	0.51	0.28**	0.31**	−0.16	(0.96)		
5. Leader gender	0.65	0.48	−0.00	0.04	0.02	−0.13	—	
6. Leader age	40.03	7.35	−0.07	−0.03	0.05	0.03	0.13	—
7. Leader education	2.80	0.70	−0.10	−0.10	0.10	−0.17	0.06	−0.15

**Notes:** N = 91 teams. Cronbach's alphas are reported along the diagonal. All correlations were calculated at the group level. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Abbreviations:** SD, standard deviations; BLM, bottom-line mentality.

collinearity we calculated the variance inflation factors (VIFs). Across all models, the highest VIF was 1.23, which is well below the cut-off point of 10. There were also no violations of assumptions concerning the normality, linearity, or homoscedasticity of residuals. We saved the Durbin–Watson statistic from our initial regression analysis that included all of the control variables and the independent variables, the nonsignificant Durbin–Watson (1.86) confirmed an absence of autocorrelation and the appropriateness of using regression analysis with these data. We tested our hypotheses using regression analysis. Hypothesis 1 predicts that BLM is positively related to leader anxiety. As summarized in Table 4, after including the controls, leader BLM was positively related to leader anxiety ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1.

We tested mediation by using PROCESS Macro in SPSS. To examine Hypothesis 2, we constructed 95% confidence intervals (CIs) around the observed indirect effects using 20,000 bootstrapped samples. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the results demonstrated that leader BLM had a positive indirect effect on abusive supervision (indirect effect = 0.04; 95% CI [0.00, 0.11]) through leader anxiety.

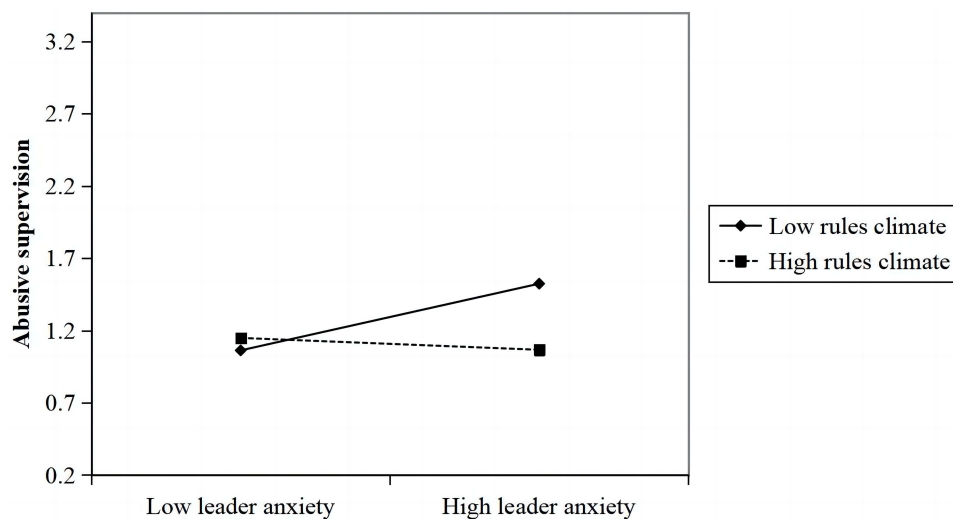
To examine Hypotheses 3 and 4, we used PROCESS Model 14 to examine the interaction between leader anxiety and rules climate and the conditional indirect effect on abusive supervision via leader anxiety (predictor variables were grand mean-centered).<sup>77</sup> Supportive of Hypothesis 3, the results showed a significant interaction between leader anxiety and rules climate ( $\beta = -0.38$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). We conducted a simple slopes analysis to examine the nature of the interaction (see Figure 2). Under low-rules climate, the positive relationship between leader anxiety and abusive

**Table 4** Regression Results for Mediation

Variables	Leader Anxiety		Abusive Supervision							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Intercept	1.45**	0.54	1.33**	0.45	1.03*	0.45	1.45**	0.53	1.50**	0.52
Leader gender	0.06	0.13	−0.13	0.11	−0.15	0.11	−0.15	0.11	−0.14	0.10
Leader age	−0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Leader education	−0.07	0.09	−0.09	0.08	−0.08	0.07	−0.07	0.07	−0.04	0.07
Leader BLM	0.21*	0.09	0.19**	0.07	0.15	0.07	0.16*	0.07	0.17*	0.07
Leader anxiety					0.21*	0.09	0.20*	0.09	0.15	0.09
Rules climate							−0.13	0.09	−0.16	0.09
XW									−0.38*	0.15
R <sup>2</sup>	0.08		0.12		0.18		0.20		0.25	
$\Delta R^2$					0.06*		0.02		0.06*	

**Notes:** N = 91 teams. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Abbreviations:** BLM, bottom-line mentality; XW, Leader anxiety\*Rules climate;  $\beta$  unstandardized regression coefficients; SE, standard errors of the regression coefficient.



**Figure 2** The Interactive Effect of Leader Anxiety and Rules Climate on Abusive Supervision.

supervision was stronger ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) than when a rules climate was high ( $\beta = -0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ , ns). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that rules climate would moderate the indirect effect of leader BLM on abusive supervision through leader anxiety. The same bootstrapping method was used to test the conditional indirect effects.<sup>78</sup> Results showed that leader anxiety mediated the relationship between leader BLM and abusive supervision when rules climate was low (indirect effect = 0.08; 95% CI [0.01, 0.17]), but not when rules climate was high (indirect effect = -0.01; 95% CI [-0.08, 0.05]). Support for Hypothesis 4 was also provided by the index of moderated mediation (indirect effect = -0.08; 95% CI [-0.19, -0.01]).

## Discussion

Although scholars' understanding of bottom-line mentality has increased dramatically in recent years,<sup>10,31,79,80</sup> research on whether BLM impacts leaders on their own behaviors in the forms of abusive supervision remains limited.<sup>81</sup> Leaders play a pivotal role in ensuring organizational effectiveness. However, leaders might have particularly limited resources adjusting to BLMs, due in part to the demands those beliefs place upon leaders' psychological resources. Given these challenges, we posit that BLMs will have a particularly problematic impact on leaders' workplace anxiety and behaviors. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by examining the impact of BLM on leaders' abusive behaviors, particularly focusing on the dysfunctional emotional response that arises from BLM. Drawing upon the theory of workplace anxiety and self-regulatory perspective, we developed and tested a team-level model that highlights BLM as a crucial mindset factor influencing abusive supervision. We propose that BLM leads to increased workplace anxiety among leaders, which, in turn, manifests as abusive behaviors toward subordinates. Additionally, we identified the rules climate as an important moderator in this relationship.

To empirically test our model, we collected data from a sample in China. The results provided support for our proposed theoretical framework. Leaders who endorsed BLM reported higher levels of workplace anxiety, which subsequently led to increased abusive behaviors towards their employees, particularly in a low-rules climate. The findings contribute to the existing literature by examining the impact of BLM on leaders' abusive behaviors, highlighting the role of workplace anxiety as a mediator and the rules climate as a moderator. We discuss the theoretical contributions and practical implications below.

## Theoretical Implications

We focus on our contributions to the literature on BLM, workplace anxiety, abusive supervisor, and rules climate before examining the theoretical ramifications of our findings. First off, management research has just recently begun to look

into BLM within organizations,<sup>4,6,7,13,18,19,82,83</sup> despite popular press pieces that highlight issues with exclusive bottom-line thinking.<sup>2</sup> The impacts of BLM on adverse outcomes have been studied using theoretical stances,<sup>1,6</sup> but the effect of BLM on one's self has not been fully conceived. In addition, theoretical and empirical studies of BLM have stressed that BLM has a trickle-down effect that leads to unethical effects,<sup>18</sup> existing BLM research has not yet developed a solid explanation to account for this restraint on leader conduct, though. As a result, we add to the BLM research by extending the theoretical underpinnings of the BLM outcomes using the theory of workplace anxiety.<sup>16</sup> We propose that TWA offers a theoretical framework for comprehending how leaders react to this problematic belief known as BLM that is embraced throughout businesses, given that it shows that individual internal characteristics play a significant influence in emotional response, ie, as a way of focusing work efforts to satisfy bottom-line demands.<sup>16</sup>

Second, in response to calls for a deeper comprehension of within individual determinants, our research adds to the body of knowledge on abusive supervision.<sup>84,85</sup> Excessively difficult goals or high-performance work systems had a positive impact on abusive supervision, according to previous research into the contextual predictors of the behavior. This was due to the fact that these factors made supervisors feel stressed and temporarily anxious and angry.<sup>65,66</sup> Our study advances the understanding of how leader affect influences abusive supervision. In addition, prior studies have examined that leaders who experience negative affect,<sup>64</sup> depression,<sup>17</sup> and discrete emotions such as anger<sup>65</sup> are positively related to abusive supervisors. We enhance this body of research by demonstrating the effects of leader workplace anxiety on abusive supervision and showing that leader BLM can cause these anxieties. This highlights the significance of taking into account individual differences between leaders when building models of abusive supervision and adds richness to scholars' understanding of both the when and why of leaders abusing their employees.

Beyond the literature on abusive supervision, our research makes contributions to the workplace anxiety literature. First, we contribute to the TWA by showing how it applies to leaders and, in particular, how it might be used to explain leaders' abusive supervision. Additionally, by extending the set of dysfunctional beliefs that have been found to raise workplace anxiety, we deepen the understanding of the literature.

Finally, our research demonstrates that a climate at work that allows people to freely choose (unethical) work-related behavior or one that signals that using unethical and appropriate behavior to attain one's goals is acceptable plays a significant role in leader BLM. According to our study, psychological work climate and leader workplace anxiety interact to influence when leaders act in abusive supervision. Specifically, in a low-rules climate, anxious leaders are particularly likely to have a negative impact on their subordinates, whereas in a high-rules climate, anxious leaders are less likely to exhibit overtly abusive behavior. Interestingly, not only can the presence of clear rules (eg, rules climate) successfully minimize anxious leaders' tendency to display abusive supervision, but also a climate that does not value selfishness and a belief in the justification of means. In a high-rules environment, the climate norms imply that methods other than abusive behavior are probably more likely to be more successful in obtaining personal objectives. Thus, the BLM individuals' strong objective concentration may be helpful in efficiently managing these people.<sup>71</sup> Here, we discovered that unethical behavior was decreased by organizational norms that favored cooperation and loyalty over self-interest and exploitation. These results emphasize the significance of an ethical climate in controlling unethical workplace behavior.

## Practical Implications

In practice, businesses frequently place a priority on their financial obligations<sup>30</sup> and pay attention to their bottom line to ensure profitability.<sup>86</sup> Bottom-line achievement is crucial for an organization's overall vitality, yet, we advise businesses to be aware of the risks associated with BLM. Those groups with high BLM disregard the idea that organizations have other values and obligations outside of achieving their bottom line.<sup>2</sup> Leaders lose sight of other factors when they grow preoccupied with bottom-line results, including encouraging their dysfunctional emotional response. That is, leaders with high BLM may also treat subordinates abusively. Therefore, businesses should stress the importance of achieving the bottom line, but not as their only priority. Leaders should be pushed to achieve bottom-line goals but not at the expense of other crucial factors (eg, philanthropic, economic, social).<sup>87</sup>

In addition, high BLM may also go unnoticed by organizations and other leaders due to the shortcomings of leader BLM. They may seek to determine whether a leader is high in BLM if they observe that the leader is downplaying the significance of managerial styles, such as abusive supervision. By doing this, the company might be able to lessen leader

BLM's detrimental impacts on workplace anxiety and eventual unethical behavior. Here, organizations could provide abuse-alternative models to leaders, such as having private one-on-one meetings and creating different ethical climates. Our study highlights the role of rules climate as a moderator in the relationship between BLM and abusive supervision. Organizations should strive to establish a rules climate that promotes fairness, transparency, and accountability. A high-rule climate can act as a safeguard against abusive behaviors by providing clear guidelines and expectations for leaders' conduct. By creating an environment that discourages abusive supervision, organizations can foster a healthier and more productive workplace. In a broader sense, companies can create supportive organizational norms and cultures, such as a rules climate where abusive supervision is prevented by company-wide processes.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its strengths, our research has several limitations, which point to important directions for future research. First, we concentrated on workplace anxiety as the sole mediator in our study between BLM and abusive supervision. Previous studies have shown that role overload, frustration, hindrance stress, anger, and depletion in leaders have an effect on abusive supervision.<sup>58,65,88</sup> In addition, discrete negative emotions experienced by leaders, such as anger, may serve as a mediator for the effects of BLM on abusive supervision.<sup>64,65</sup> Theorizing and empirical testing more discrete emotions of leaders in reaction to BLM may therefore be a benefit to future research.

Second, we failed to integrate both the beneficial and detrimental consequences of BLM into a thorough framework. We, therefore, advise future research to adopt this more comprehensive strategy and gain a better knowledge of the circumstances in which BLM is most likely to produce positive versus negative results. This could, for instance, entail a more in-depth analysis of the particular HR practices with a focus on which are more likely to result in positive versus negative consequences, and the kinds of leaders who are more likely to experience these effects.

Third, the beneficial effects of workplace anxiety were not examined in our study. With BLM, it is crucial to take a nuanced perspective on workplace anxiety, as TWA points out that anxiety is positively related to individuals, such as improved engagement or job performance.<sup>16</sup> In addition, although our study focused on rules climate as a boundary condition of the relationship between anxiety and abuse supervision, future research would benefit from examining leaders' individual differences, such as emotional intelligence, which predicts leaders' capacities to control the inappropriate behavior associated with BLM, taking into account structural changes that can make it easier to adapt to new systems, or looking at the advantages of social support.

A final limitation of our research is that we used cross-sectional data to test the hypotheses and argued for a specific direction of causality based on TWA. However, it is also possible that leaders with high BLM are due to feeling workplace anxiety. Although earlier research using (scenario) experimental designs supports the hypothesized direction of causality,<sup>89</sup> future research could use longitudinal designs to explore the possibly reciprocal relationships.

## Conclusion

The popular press often features articles that highlight the dysfunctional nature of exclusive bottom-line thinking. Recently, organizational research has started to investigate the dysfunction surrounding a sole focus on bottom-line outcomes through the BLM concept. By integrating the theory of workplace anxiety and a self-regulatory perspective, we theorized and explored how leaders' BLM shape their own dysfunctional emotion and leader behaviors. Results from a multi-wave, multi-source field study uncover the reason for this finding is that leaders' high in BLM encapsulate apprehension and tension, which are deficient in fostering functional emotion (eg, workplace anxiety) as an important affect process that facilitates unethical behavior (eg, abusive supervision), especially under low-rules climate. During this process, we identify rules climate as an important boundary condition for our model and theorization. The theoretical and practical implications discussed provide valuable insights for organizations seeking to develop effective programs to support the leaders and address and prevent abusive supervision, especially if they might be high in BLM. While the study has its limitations, it opens avenues for future research to further explore the complex dynamics between BLM, leaders' behaviors, and contextual factors. We encourage researchers to continue to investigate the effects of leader BLMs on the functioning of leader outcomes. We also hope that our research will encourage future scholarship that examines not just top-down effects of BLM but also focuses on the impact of BLM on leaders themselves.

## Ethics Statement

College of Business' Research Committee acting as Institutional Ethics Committee has examined the surveys to be used for this project. College of Business' Research Committee hereby confirm that informed consent was obtained from all study participants and that the guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki were strictly adhered to. Furthermore, this research project complies with Shanghai University of Finance and Economics' guidelines and procedures, and does not entail any ethical or legal concerns. Therefore, the implementation of the research is approved and the research project is recorded as How Bottom-Line Mentality Leads to Abusive Supervision? Investigating the Mediating Effects of Anxiety (2021310140-202301).

## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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