In search of normative goal alignment within organisations: the role of employee seniority and identification with the leader

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Abstract

Frame of the research: In today's fast-paced business environments, it is key to understand what facilitates alignment between employees and managers on organisational goals for enhanced performance. Drawing from Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and goal alignment literature, this study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by exploring the nuanced roles of employee seniority and identification with the leader in shaping normative goal alignment.

Purpose of the paper: This study investigates the role of employee seniority and leader identification in shaping normative goal alignment, thus contributing to the existing literature and offering practical implications to enhance normative goal alignment within organisations.

Methodology: Data are collected from 719 white-collar staff and 313 managers in 20 manufacturing firms. A survey is designed for measuring normative goal alignment, employee seniority, and leader identification. Hypotheses are tested through regression analysis.

Findings: The study finds a negative relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment. However, leader identification positively moderates this relationship, suggesting that employees who identify strongly with their leaders are more likely to be aligned with managers on normative goals, regardless of seniority.

Research limits: The research is limited by its focus on Northeast Italy's manufacturing industry and its cross-sectional design. Future studies could explore normative goal alignment in different contexts and employ longitudinal research designs.

Practical implications: The results highlight the importance of employee seniority and leader identification in shaping normative goal alignment. Organisations should be aware of these factors and take steps to ensure effective alignment, such as investing in leadership development programmes or implementing strategies to encourage alignment between employees of different seniority levels.

Originality of the paper: This study contributes to the goal alignment literature by focusing on employee seniority and leader identification in shaping normative goal alignment between employees and managers.

Keywords: normative goal alignment; goal-framing theory; normative goals; identification with the leader; employee seniority.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, organisations are confronted with unprecedented levels of uncertainty. To maintain their competitive position, firms must respond swiftly to external changes while continuously adapting their internal structures and processes (Barney and Wright 1998; Noe *et al.*, 2006). One aspect for achieving this aim lies in fostering alignment between employees and the organisation's strategic goals, particularly normative goals, which play a crucial role in a variety of organisational outcomes (Delery and Roumpi 2017; Foss and Lindenberg 2013).

In this view, when individuals within organisations share the same goals, they are more likely to be motivated and committed and to perform better (Kaplan and Norton 2006). The alignment employees with an organisation's strategic objectives occupies a prominent position in the field of strategic human resource management (SHRM), which posits that organisations can generate strategic capability by ensuring that they have skilled and committed employees working towards common goals (Armstrong 2006). However, while the significance of goal alignment is well established, the factors that influence normative goal alignment between employees and their managers remain less investigated.

One factor to consider in this context is the role of employee seniority. While it might be expected that more senior employees would be more aligned with the corporate strategy due to their greater experience and sense of duty (Martin and Schmidt 2010), this relationship is not as straightforward as it may appear. Indeed, increased seniority may not always lead to stronger alignment; it could also result in distancing from organisational goals due to complacency or a sense of entitlement.

The goal of this study is to examine the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment between employees and their managers, building on previous research that has investigated the impact of employee identification with the leader (Kark *et al.*, 2003; Kelman 1958; Pratt 1998; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004). Clarifying the role of employee seniority in this context can provide insights for organisations, enabling them to take steps to facilitate goal alignment and, consequently, improve their organisational outcomes. Thus, the primary research objective of this study is to answer the following research question:

RQ: How does employee seniority affect normative goal alignment between employees and their managers?

To address this question, we adopt goal-framing theory (Lindenberg and Foss 2011) as theoretical lens to examine the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment. Goal-framing theory posits that individuals prioritise goals within a hierarchy, with higher-order goals guiding lower-order ones. This framework allows us to argue that seniority may negatively impact normative goal alignment, as more senior employees might prioritise gain and hedonic goals or departmental objectives over organisational goals.

Moreover, we draw upon the literature on identification with leaders (Kark *et al.*, 2003; Kelman 1958; Pratt 1998; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004) to argue that the negative effect of seniority on normative goal alignment can be mitigated by the level of identification that employees have with their leader. When employees recognise themselves in their leader, they are more likely to align with the organisation's normative goals and remain committed to their achievement, counteracting the potential distancing effect of seniority. By integrating goal-framing theory and leader identification, we provide a novel perspective on how employee seniority and identification with leaders jointly influence normative goal alignment in organisations.

To test our hypotheses, we collect data from a sample of employees and managers in the manufacturing industry in Northeast Italy. This setting provides a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment, given the industry's hierarchical structure and the importance of clear goals for performance.

We employ a cross-sectional research design using survey data to capture the perspectives of both employees and their managers. Our analysis included an independent variable-employee seniority, as measured by years of experience in the organisation-and a moderator-identification with the leader. By examining the combined relationship, we arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the role of seniority in shaping normative goal alignment.

Our results reveal that employee seniority negatively impacts normative goal alignment, indicating that increased seniority might lead to distancing from organisational goals. However, our results also demonstrate that identification with the leader can mitigate this negative relationship, suggesting that a strong connection between employees and their managers can weaken the negative effects of seniority on goal alignment. These insights contribute to the ongoing theoretical debate on goal alignment and provide practical implications for organisations seeking to enhance the alignment of their employees' goals with those of their managers.

Drawing from our analysis, organisations can increase their awareness of the impact of employee seniority on goal alignment and thus attempt to take appropriate steps to ensure effective alignment. This may involve fostering a strong sense of identification with the leader, particularly among senior employees, as a means to counteract the negative effects of seniority on goal alignment. By doing so, organisations can enhance normative goal alignment and ultimately improve their performance and overall effectiveness. Thus, this study contributes to the understanding of the role of employee seniority in shaping normative goal alignment between employees and their managers and highlights the importance of considering both seniority and identification with the leader in promoting effective goal alignment practices. As organisations continue to face the challenges of an increasingly competitive and dynamic business environment, fostering strong normative goal alignment between employees and their managers will remain a relevant factor in supporting a variety of organisational outcomes.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1 Strategic human resource management

Strategic human resource management plays a key role in an organisation's ability to achieve its objectives by aligning HR practices with business strategy and promoting a cohesive, integrated approach to managing human resources (Miles and Snow 1978, 1984). SHRM ensures that the organisation's human capital is aligned with the business strategy and leveraged to gain a competitive advantage (Miles and Snow 1984; Schuler 1992; Tyson 1997; Wright and McMahan 1992).

Since its conception, the field of SHRM has been in continuous expansion. This is mainly due to the increasing recognition within strategic management of the capabilities (knowledge first and foremost) and commitment of employees in enabling a firm to achieve a competitive advantage (Barney and Wright 1998). The central purpose of SHRM consists of creating internally consistent practices and routines, building consensus, and fostering a positive work environment that promotes employee engagement and commitment. Therefore, it is expected that highly engaged and committed employees provide support for the achievement of strategic and organisational goals (Huselid *et al.*, 1997).

In this view, Backer (1999) stated that SHRM requires a comprehensive approach in which personnel systems (recruitment, selection, rewards, appraisal, and performance management) are integrated internally and aligned with the organisation's overall strategy. Wright and McMahan (1992) described SHRM as 'the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals' (p. 298), reinforcing the notion that SHRM plays an essential role in the overall strategic management process.

Strategic human resource management has a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The horizontal dimension refers to connecting practices and routines across different HR functions (Werbel and De Marie 2005), as might happen for firms belonging to the same group, while the vertical dimension refers to linking human resource management human resource management features to corporate strategy. In this study, we focused on the alignment occurring at the vertical dimension. Vertical alignment is key for establishing congruence between business strategy and human resource strategy.

To ensure vertical alignment, individuals are involved in the definition of the team's goals, which are set to support achieving corporate goals (Armstrong 2006). Such an approach encourages employee involvement in the strategic process, fostering a sense of ownership and motivation to contribute to the organisation's success. From this standpoint, goals should be agreed upon through open dialogue between managers and individuals, fostering a work environment with shared responsibilities and mutual expectations (Armstrong 2006). Such an environment could strengthen the alignment between individual and organisational goals also promoting a culture of trust and open communication, which is relevant for long-term organisational success.

By actively participating in the strategic planning process, HR professionals can ensure that HR strategies are designed to support and enhance the organisation's overall objectives. This proactive approach allows HR to anticipate future workforce needs and develop strategies to attract, retain, and develop the talent required for success (Werbel and De Marie 2005).

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2.2 Strategic goal alignment

Prior research has discussed the importance of aligning employees' skills, abilities, and competencies for organisation's strategies (Barney and Wright 1998; Boswell, 2006; Noe *et al.*, 2006). Studies have explored how employees contribute to organisational strategy, focusing on employee skills and personal traits (Raffiee and Coff 2016) or human resource management practices (Collins and Clark 2003; Delery and Roumpi 2017). Boswell (2006) underscored the role of employees' awareness and involvement in corporate strategy. In particular, the author conceptualised the importance of the '*line of sight* to the strategic objectives' as 'an employee understanding the strategic objectives of an organization and how to contribute to those objectives' (ibidem: p. 1491).

We build the conceptualisation of 'strategic alignment' on Boswell's (2006) 'line of sight' concept. Furthermore, as argued in the literature, when dealing with individuals within organisations, it is crucial to consider the heterogeneity among different hierarchical levels. In *Organizations* and subsequent works, March and Simon (1993) explicitly acknowledged the heterogeneity of individuals' perceptions and goals, which can lead to internal conflicts and challenges in strategic alignment and coordination. This internal heterogeneity includes the perceptual differences across individuals within the same organisation (Gibson *et al.*, 2009; Shamir 1995), arising partly from the formal positions and roles assigned to them and partly from the implementation of these roles (March and Simon 1993). Grounded in perceptual theory, scholars have investigated the perceptual distance across individuals (e.g. Allport 1955). In this paper, we focus on the perceptual differences that exist from one hierarchical level to another.

Regarding hierarchical levels, Gibson *et al.*, (2019) developed a new perspective on the nature of heterogeneity within organisations and posited that individuals within organisations have dissimilar perceptions and goals at different hierarchical levels. They examined the nature of these differences across various levels of the organisational hierarchy. Specifically, scholars observed the existence of a 'hierarchical erosion effect,' whereby the lower one's position in the organisational hierarchy, the less favourable one's perceptions of certain practices and goals become (Gibson *et al.*, 2019, p. 6).

The notion that individuals at different levels within the organisation perceive things differently was first contended by March and Simon (1993) and confirmed in later works (e.g. Cole and Bruch 2006; Gibson *et al.*, 2019). The hierarchical erosion effect is closely related to individual identification (Horton *et al.*, 2014). Individual identification varies across hierarchical levels, with senior managers identifying strongly with the organisation

and frontline employees identifying with their narrow work units, thus losing sight of the organisation's strategic mission. Furthermore, the effect of hierarchical erosion is influenced by access to strategic information, which affects identification and employees' perceptions. Specifically, when employees have less access to strategic information, identification might be low and hierarchical erosion might be high. Consequently, employees might lack an understanding of the organisation's goals and priorities (Gibson *et al.*, 2019; March and Simon 1993). Considering these differences in strategic objective alignment among the different levels of the organisational hierarchy, Weiser *et al.*, (2020) called for future studies to examine the continuous interplay of conceptualising and enacting strategies at multiple hierarchical levels.

Thus, we focus on multiple hierarchical levels, assuming that the perception of strategic goals tends to decrease at lower levels of the hierarchy, which likely affects employees' alignment with strategic goals. Given the importance of strategic goal alignment to a firm's success and the hierarchical erosion effect, we turn our attention to strategic alignment between employees and managers. We argue that to ensure such alignment, all staff within a firm must share the same strategic goals (primarily those of the firm).

Alignment between managers and employees with the organisation's strategic goals is of considerable importance, as it reflects the level of alignment of the organisation's staff with the organisation's strategy (Biggs *et al.*, 2014; Boswell 2006; Boudreau and Ramstad 2003). Managers play different roles than subordinates because of their hierarchical positions in an organisation. Therefore, differences in hierarchical levels and the associated differences in authority and power lead to differences in perceptions between managers and subordinates (London and Smither 1995). These differences are also evident in the perception of the organisation's strategy.

Both managers and employees can play a role in facilitating the attainment of a firm's strategic goals. However, according to strategic alignment theory, employees and managers must be aware of the strategic priorities of the organisation, consider them important, and understand how their job contributes to achieving these priorities (Biggs *et al.*, 2014). Alignment with an organisation's strategic objectives might encourage a feeling of 'fit' with the organisation, improving the managers' and employees' sense of awareness of the organisation's direction and goals (Boswell 2006).

2.3 Goal-framing theory: aligning to normative goals

Individuals within organisations often pursue distinct goals, which can be classified into three types, as proposed by Lindenberg and Foss (2011): hedonic, gain, and normative. A goal frame signifies a dominant overarching goal within an individual. Normative goals correspond to the firm's strategic, organisational, and market objectives (Foss and Lindenberg 2013). Conversely, gain and hedonic goals are more individual-oriented, with the former focusing on personal and professional growth and the

latter revolving around well-being, encompassing the attainment of a healthy work-life balance and a satisfactory salary in return for a 'decent' job (Lindenberg and Foss 2011). The goals of managers significantly influence those of employees (Foss and Lindenberg 2013), prompting this study to investigate the goal alignment between these two roles and its implications for organisational performance and competitive advantage. Understanding the dynamics of goal alignment is essential for organisations striving to achieve a competitive edge. By examining the interplay between individual and organisational goals, as well as the factors that contribute to their alignment or misalignment, this study provides insights into the complex relationships that underpin organisational performance and success. The persistence of the three goal types could vary among individuals.

According to goal frame theory, normative goals tend to be characterised by the highest level of precariousness (e.g. Foss and Lindenberg 2013; Lindenberg 2003; Lindenberg and Foss 2011). Foss and Lindenberg (2012) contended that the normative goal frame is inherently precarious, which aligns with an evolutionary perspective wherein the group exists for the individual's adaptive advantage rather than the reverse. This precarious nature of normative goals has significant implications for organisational dynamics, as individuals may prioritise their gain and hedonic goals over organisational objectives, leading to potential misalignment and reduced effectiveness in achieving strategic targets (Foss and Lindenberg 2013). In this perspective, individuals may tend to identify weakly with organisational goals (Foss and Lindenberg 2012). Indeed, normative goals are subject to varying salience, and their precarious nature can weaken or even switch entirely (Lindenberg 2003). The authors emphasised that recognising the critical role of the normative goal frame and its uncertainty may be 'the most important ingredient' for understanding organisations based on goal frame theory (Foss and Lindenberg 2012). A decline in the willingness to pursue normative goals could explain potential backdrops in organisational outcomes, as suggested by Foss and Lindberg (2013). Indeed, since employees are the means by which organisational goals are achieved, they must be aligned with normative organisational goals to contribute effectively to realising these objectives (Boswell 2006).

Gain and hedonic goals might be prioritised by several individuals as they address basic human needs. Drawing upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs, hedonic goals concern safety and love/belonging, while gain goals involve esteem and self-actualisation. Conversely, normative goals represent the perspective of a 'supra-individual entity': the firm and what benefits it (Foss and Lindenberg 2013, p. 95). Fostering an organisational culture that encourages an increasing alignment between personal and organisational goals is key to promoting higher levels of motivation, commitment, and satisfaction among employees (Locke and Latham 2002). Thus, while normative goals often pertain organisational outcomes, the impact of gain or hedonic goals is more tightly related to the individual sphere. Moreover, such goals have been demonstrated to mediate the relationship between assigned goals and individual performance: individuals setting specific, challenging goals perform better (Locke and Latham 1990).

To maintain a balance among different goals and possibly ensure goal alignment within individuals, organisations should develop mechanisms that encourage employees to adopt normative goals while simultaneously respecting their individual needs and aspirations. This may include transparent communication of organisational objectives, provision of opportunities for professional development, and the establishment of a supportive and inclusive work environment that promotes both personal well-being and commitment to the organisation's mission (Kaplan and Norton 2006). Additionally, the role of leadership in shaping and sustaining goal alignment cannot be understated. Transformational leaders can inspire employees to adopt organisational goals by articulating a clear vision, demonstrating a commitment to organisational values, and fostering a sense of collective identity (Bass 1999). By effectively aligning individual goals with organisational objectives, organisations can harness the full potential of their human capital, ultimately enhancing their competitive position in the market.

2.4 The precariousness of normative goals

Normative goals, representing the strategic, organisational, and market objectives of a firm, offer a unifying framework that directs employee behaviour and decision-making processes towards achieving shared objectives. Employees aligned with normative goals are more likely to engage in actions and behaviours that contribute to the organisation's overall success, fostering unity and purpose within the workforce. Moreover, alignment with normative goals promotes a culture of accountability and commitment to the organisation's mission. Employees who comprehend and internalise normative goals are more inclined to assume responsibility for their actions and exhibit a higher commitment to attaining organisational objectives. In turn, this can lead to increased employee satisfaction, motivation, and retention, as individuals perceive their work as meaningful and valuable within the broader organisational context.

Nevertheless, the hierarchical erosion effect (Gibson *et al.*, 2019) posits that knowledge of and alignment with organisational goals tend to decrease at lower levels of the hierarchy, potentially affecting strategic goal alignment due to the misalignment between employees' normative and strategic goals. These assumptions are consonant with Gavetti *et al*'s (2007) assertion that an organisation is a 'coalition of heterogeneous participants with conflicting interests, goals, and knowledge' (p. 527).

Considering the precarious nature of normative goals and the hierarchical erosion effect, we argue that managers and employees achieve the highest level of alignment with normative goals, particularly in the short term, when employees' seniority is low. Conversely, in the medium to long term, when employees hold the same work position for several years, this alignment may wane, primarily because employees (or individuals in lower hierarchical positions) modify their priorities, emphasising personal growth and well-being over organisational objectives.

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Existing evidence indicates that increasing tenure in a work position might diminish an employee's alignment with the organisation's strategic goals (Boswell 2006).

During their tenure, employees experience various organisational changes, often occurring without clear guidance or direction (e.g. Choi 2011). In this rapidly changing context, senior employees who have developed routines and practices over time may resist adopting new normative goals, particularly if these goals challenge their established work methods, resulting in a deterioration in alignment with normative goals (Boswell 2006). Senior employees may prioritise gain and hedonic goals that maintain the status quo or minimise risks to preserve their career stability, even if these objectives deviate from normative goals (e.g. Peeters *et al.*, 2022). Such resistance could create a mismatch between managers' and employees' goals, hindering the achievement of organisational goals and competitive advantage.

Building on employee commitment literature, prior research suggests that seniority negatively affects commitment; younger employees demonstrate higher commitment levels than their senior counterparts (e.g. Hong *et al.*, 2016). Given that employee commitment could enhance the employee alignment with organisational strategic goals (e.g. Meyer and Maltin 2010), seniority can adversely impact strategic goal alignment between managers and employees. Thus, based on the aforementioned arguments, we hypothesise the following:

Hypothesis 1. *Employee seniority is negatively related to normative goal alignment between managers and employees.*

2.5 *The moderating role of identification with the leader*

Identification is a process through which an individual perceives another entity (individual, group, or object) as an authority over themselves (Pratt 1998). Identification, as a perceptual or cognitive construct (Meal and Ashforth 1992), may occur when an individual accepts influence to establish or maintain a satisfying, self-defining relationship with another person or group (Kelman 1958). The construct of identification emerged early in the development of organisational science (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008).

Over the years, literature has primarily focused on organisational identification, referring to an individual's identification with a firm's core values and culture (e.g. Meal and Ashfort 1992; Pratt 1998; van Knippenberg and van Schie 2000). In organisational behaviour, the most commonly studied identification target is the collective, primarily an organisation, and, secondarily, an occupation or team (e.g. Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). In contrast, personal identification, as defined by Ashforth *et al.*, (2016), refers to perceived oneness with another individual, wherein one defines oneself in relation to the other.

Scholars have recognised the leader of a business unit (BU), department, or function as a key target of individuals' identification processes (Kark *et al.*, 2003). According to Hobman *et al.*, (2011), personal identification with the leader is 'a self-categorization process that involves an individual

defining him or herself in terms of the attributes of the leader, shifting their focus on individual gains for the leader, and experiencing a high level of connection with the leader' (p. 556).

Identification with the leader encourages followers to be loyal to the leader, perceiving the leader's interests as their own (Van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004), thus facilitating strategic goal alignment between managers and employees. Consequently, followers perceive their leader as part of their self-concept, creating a stronger psychological connection with both the leader and the whole organisation (Bunjak *et al.*, 2019).

Although numerous studies have explored personal identification with the leader and its impact on follower outcomes, researchers have disagreed on whether this phenomenon is beneficial or detrimental (Ashforth *et al.*, 2016). Some studies have reported positive outcomes, such as increased job satisfaction, job performance, commitment, and career development, as well as lower turnover intention (e.g. Hobman *et al.*, 2011; Zhu *et al.*, 2013).

In contrast, other studies have associated identification with unethical behaviour, noting that under unethical leaders, followers may engage in unethical actions and hinder ethical behaviour in others (e.g. Brown and Treviño 2009; Gino and Galinsky 2012; Kark *et al.*, 2003).

In this paper, we posit that identification with the leader can positively impact the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment. According to the goal-framing perspective, the stability of the normative goal frame may be significantly influenced by 'contagion effects', both positively and negatively (Lindenberg and Foss 2011). Specifically, we argue that higher levels of identification with the leader can positively moderate the detrimental effects of employee seniority.

If identification with the leader is strong, the negative impact of seniority on normative alignment between employees and managers is mitigated by the positive outcomes associated with a close relationship with the manager, such as reciprocal trust and psychosocial support, career development, loyalty, and shared values and goals (e.g. Ashforth *et al.*, 2016; Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005).

When the identification with the leader is high, senior employees exhibit greater organisational commitment. Such senior employees share values and beliefs with their leader. This alignment makes followers feel that they contribute to the organisation's success (Zhu *et al.*, 2013). These outcomes, in turn, reinforce the normative goal alignment between employees and managers (e.g. Bunjak *et al.*, 2019; Kark *et al.*, 2003; Wang and Rode 2010).

Conversely, weaker identification with the leader exacerbates the negative relationship between employee seniority and goal alignment. When identification with the leader is weak, the effects of employee seniority are amplified by a lack of trust in the leader, a lack of organisational commitment, and a lack of shared values, resulting in diminished normative goal alignment (e.g. Ashforth *et al.*, 2016; Kark *et al.*, 2003; Zhu *et al.*, 2013). Based on these arguments, we hypothesise the following:

Hypothesis 2. *Identification with the leader weakens the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment between managers and employees. Thus, the greater the identification with the leader, the less negative the relationship.*

Figure 1 summarises our research model.

Fig. 1: Research model
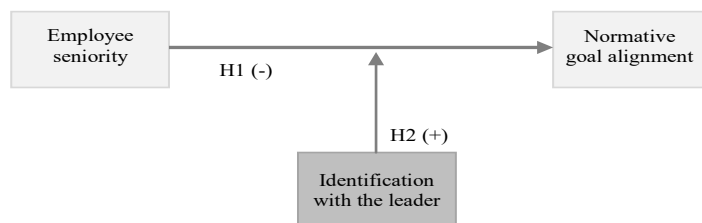
Source: our elaboration

3. Method

3.1 Sample and setting

Data were collected from white-collar staff and managers employed in 20 manufacturing firms located in Northeast Italy. The data collection lasted about one year and was carried out up to December 2021. Our study includes firms from diverse industries, such as food, furniture, machinery, and steel. By selecting a varied range of firms, we were able to avoid the issue of single-source bias that occurs when there is overlapping variability (Groves *et al.*, 2011). We designed a self-administered survey that eliminated potential directional responses. We achieved this by organising the key questions into different sections and avoiding clear references to the model in Figure 1. These measures helped enhance the validity of the study and mitigated biases among the participants, shifting their attention to cause-effect relationships. In Table 1, we report a description of the sample characteristics related to the employees included in the study.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study was built using a two-step approach to measure normative goal alignment between employees and their managers. Based on Foss and Lindenberg (2013), as a first step, we developed and administered to all participants a list of six goals, which were randomly assorted and which reflected normative, gain, and hedonic goals. In fact, as Foss and Lindenberg (2013) stated, there are 'three overarching goals. There is the overarching hedonic goal, which expresses the desire to

improve (or preserve) the way one feels right now, related to one's need fulfilment; there is the overarching gain goal, which expresses the desire to improve (or preserve) one's resources; and there is the overarching normative goal, which expresses the desire to act appropriately in the service of a collective entity, such as an organisation or a group' (pp. 87-88). The normative goal items were based on the achievement of the strategic objectives set by the firm or the team, while the gain goal items were focused on personal career opportunities and advancement; the hedonic goal items were based on having a good work-life balance. The list of the proposed goals is presented in Table 2.

Tab. 1: Sample characteristics

	n	%
Gender		
Male	458	63.70%
Female	261	36.30%
Age		
Under 25	11	1.53%
25-34	136	18.92%
35-44	210	29.21%
45-54	269	37.41%
Over 54	74	10.29%
Unspecified	19	2.64%
Education level		
Less than high school diploma	39	5.42%
High school diploma	314	43.67%
Bachelor's degree	67	9.32%
Master's degree or more	272	37.83%
Unspecified	26	3.62%
Employee seniority		
2 years or less	99	13.77%
3-5 years	105	14.60%
6-9 years	82	11.40%
10-15	184	25.59%
16-25	166	23.09%
More than 25	83	11.54%
Business Unit Category		
Administration & Control	81	11.27%
Supply Chain	99	13.77%
R&D	80	11.13%
Production/Engineering	220	30.60%
HR	37	5.15%
Sales	176	24.48%

n = 719.

Source: our elaboration

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<div align="center">Tab. 2: Normative, gain, and hedonic goals</div>

Normative goals
- Achieving the goals set by my firm.
- Achieving the goals of my work team.
Gain goals
- Having opportunities for career growth and advancement.
- Working in contact with people and having a good relationship with colleagues.
Hedonic goals
- Maintaining a good balance between work and leisure time.
 -Having a consistently stimulating job.

Source: our elaboration

In the second step, the respondents (both managers and employees) were asked to order the goals in descending rank (from the one having their highest priority to the one having their lowest priority) based on their personal priorities. The goal rankings of the employees were then associated with those of their managers, who could be the chiefs of the specific BU, function, or department. If both an employee and their manager indicated a normative goal in the first or second position, a value of 1 was assigned to the normative goal alignment variable, and 0 was assigned otherwise. This method of measuring normative goal alignment was thus based on the subjective priorities of employees and managers. Comparing the rankings of the employees and their managers, we identified cases of alignment or misalignment between the two groups on normative goals.

3.2.2 Independent and moderating variables

To measure employee seniority, we administered a question in the survey in which the employees had to indicate how many years they had been employed by the firm in which they were currently working. This measure allowed us to gather accurate data on the length of service of each employee while also capturing information related to the experience levels of each employee in the firm they were currently operating.

To measure identification with the leader, we adopted a scale originally developed by Mael and Ashfort (1992) on organisational identification and then adapted in various studies to measure identification with the leader (e.g. Kark *et al.*, 2003; Van Quaquebeke *et al.*, 2010). To enhance the validity of the adopted latent scale, we relied on congeneric approaches, utilising the congeneric latent construct (CLC) estimator proposed by Marzi *et al.*, (2023). This approach strengthened the accuracy and reliability of our measurements, ensuring a more robust assessment of the underlying constructs. In Table 3, we report the list of items and reliability coefficients for the adopted latent construct.

Tab. 3: Items and reliability of the latent variable

	Omega	AVE
Identification with the leader 1. When someone criticises my leader, it feels like a personal insult 2. When I talk about my leader, I usually say 'we' rather than 'he or she' 3. I am very interested in what others think about my leader 4. My leader's successes are my successes 5. When someone praises my leader, it feels like a personal compliment 6. If a story in the media criticised my leader, I would feel embarrassed	.82	.45
		n=719

Source: our elaboration

3.2.3 Control variables

The first set of control variables consisted of socio-demographic factors, including age, gender, and education. These characteristics represent relevant control variables, as they may be associated with different goals. For example, younger employees may prioritise career advancement more highly than older employees, who may prioritise work-life balance or normative goals. Education level may also be relevant, as more highly educated employees may be more likely to prioritise normative goals related to the organisation's strategic objectives. Including these variables as controls allowed us to examine whether the relationship between normative goal alignment and employee seniority and identification with the leader holds even after accounting for these demographic differences. Another control variable we included is the length of time an employee has been working with their current supervisor. This variable is relevant as an employee who has been working with their supervisor for a longer period of time may be more likely to have established a good working relationship with them, which could influence their goal alignment. Finally, we included BU-level and firm-level variables as controls to examine whether there were any fixed effects related to the specific context in which each employee was operating. For example, employees in certain BUs or at certain levels of the firm may be more likely to prioritise normative goals related to the organisation's strategic objectives, regardless of their seniority or identification with the leader, due to the organisational climate or culture incentivising certain types of goals.

3.3 Statistical method

We used Stata 17, a widely adopted statistical software, to conduct the statistical analysis. In the Results section, we present a correlation table with all the variables included in the regression analysis. Regression analysis was utilised for hypothesis testing, as it is a flexible and versatile tool for examining the relationship between multiple independent variables and one dependent variable. The adoption of regression techniques allowed us to fit our research model while also accounting for the diverse nature of

the variables included in the study. In addition, it aided in controlling for a number of factors and assess the statistical significance of the hypothesised relationships.

The resulting models are presented using incremental logic. First, we present a model that includes only control variables. Next, we added the independent effects incrementally, followed by the interaction effect. This approach enabled us to observe improvements in the R-squared coefficient and to assess the statistical significance of each added effect independently.

4. Results

In Table 4, we report the correlations among the variables. As shown, among the independent variables, employee seniority (the main independent variable) is correlated with the overall time spent with the supervisor ($\rho = .37$, p<.01), age ($\rho = .49$, p<.01) and education ($\rho = .25$, p<.01). Hence, to check for multicollinearity issues, we computed the variance inflation factors (VIFs), none of which exceeded the recommended thresholds (Chatterjee and Hadi 2006).

Tab. 4: Correlation matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Normative goal alignment	-							
2.Time in the firm	-.07**	-						
3.Id. with the leader	.15***	-.02	-					
4.Time with supervisor	-.06*	.37***	-.04	-				
5. Age	.14***	.49***	.07*	.25***	-			
6. Gender	-.08**	.01	-.06	.09*	-.09*	-		
7. Education	-.08**	-.25***	-.00	-.04	-.02	.06*	-	
8. Firm	-.12***	-.11***	-.07*	-.20***	-.06*	-.11***	-.04	-
9. Business unit	.02	-.02	.01	-.01	.01	.00	.07*	.06

n = 719.
Source: our elaboration. ***p < .01; **p < .05; *p<.1.

In Table 5, we report the results of the regression analysis. Model 1 concerns the effects of the control variables on the dependent variable. In Model 2, we added the main independent variable (employee seniority), which corresponds to Hypothesis 1. In Model 3, we assessed all the direct effects (including identification with the leader), and in Model 4, we added the interaction effect corresponding to Hypothesis 2.

With respect to the effect of length of time at the firm on normative goal alignment (Hypothesis 1), as shown in Models 2-4, we found a negative and significant relationship (in Model 2, $\beta = -.06$, p<.01). Thus, Hypothesis 1 receives strong empirical support. Turning to the interaction effect, we found a positive and significant moderation of identification with the leader, consistent with Hypothesis 2. Thus, both Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported.

Tab. 5: Results of regression analysis

	Hp	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Independent variables					
Time in the firm	1		-.06*** (.01)	-.05*** (.01)	-.06*** (.01)
Identification with the leader				.04*** (.01)	.03*** (.01)
Interaction effect					
Time in the firm X Identification with the leader	2				.02*** (.01)
Control variables					
Gender		-.04* (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.03 (.03)
Age		.05*** (.01)	.07*** (.01)	.07*** (.01)	.07*** (.01)
Education		-.02** (.01)	-.04*** (.01)	-.04*** (.01)	-.04*** (.01)
Time with supervisor		-.01*** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.00* (.00)	-.01** (.00)
Firm		-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)
Business unit		.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)
R-squared		.06	.08	.09	.10
n		719	719	719	719

Note: The dependent variable is normative goal alignment. ***p<.01; **p<.05; *p<.1 (standard errors in parentheses).

Source: our elaboration.

Our study is grounded in the assumption that people who work at higher hierarchical levels in a firm tend to be more aligned with normative goals than those at lower hierarchical levels. To support this assumption, we conducted a t-test on two independent subgroups (namely, 719 employees and 313 managers, as reported in Table 6) and empirically found that managers have almost double the likelihood of prioritising normative goals compared to employees (between the two sample groups, the difference in normative orientation was significant at a p-value = .00; probability$_{normative}$(employee) = .25; probability$_{normative}$(manager) = .49).

Furthermore, as shown in Table 6, managers tended to prioritise normative goals and placed hedonic goals at the end of their priority lists. Conversely, employees more often prioritised hedonic goals, while their last priority does not show a clear pattern.

Tab. 6: Goal orientations of employees and managers in the sample

Employees	n	%	Managers	n	%
First goal			*First goal*		
Normative	183	25.4%	Normative	152	48.6%
Gain	212	29.5%	Gain	42	13.4%
Hedonic	324	45.1%	Hedonic	119	38.0%
Last goal			*Last goal*		
Normative	205	28.5%	Normative	30	9.9%
Gain	259	36.0%	Gain	128	40.9%
Hedonic	255	35.5%	Hedonic	155	49.2%
Grand total	719	100.0%		313	100.0%

Source: our elaboration

In addition, our sample outlines that in most cases, misalignment is due to shifts from normative goals to gain or hedonic goals among employees (the difference between misalignment is significant, with employees misaligning with normative goals more often than managers, p-value = .00). These results support the underlying theoretical assumption that managers are more inclined towards normative goals.

As far as it concerns control variables, employee gender was not found to be a significant factor affecting goal alignment, and time spent with the supervisor lost its statistical significance when considering our main variable (employee seniority). Interestingly, employee age was positively associated with normative goal alignment, while education was negatively associated with normative goal alignment. Concerning these aspects, we carried out an additional exploration and found that while considering a normative employee orientation (1 if the employee indicated a normative goal as their top priority, 0 otherwise), the analysis of variance produced results consistent with Table 5. In fact, normative orientation was positively influenced by age and negatively influenced by education. More specifically, among the different age classes (p = .00) and education levels (p = .04), the difference was significant and in the same direction as predicted by our models (see Table 5).

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5. Discussion

This study contributes to the extant literature in multiple ways and provides insights for both researchers and practitioners interested in understanding the dynamics of goal alignment within organisations.

First, our study extends previous research on goal alignment by focusing on the role of employee seniority in the relationship between normative goal alignment and organisational effectiveness. While prior studies have examined the impact of goal alignment on various organisational outcomes (e.g. Kaplan and Norton 2006), our study is among the first to explore how employee seniority may influence normative goal alignment. The negative relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment found in our study suggests that more experienced employees may be less aligned with their managers' normative goals, which could potentially lead to reduced organisational effectiveness. This highlights the importance of considering employees' career stages when developing strategies to improve goal alignment within organisations.

Second, our study contributes to the literature on the role of identification with the leader in goal alignment (e.g. Kark *et al.*, 2003; Van Quaquebeke *et al.*, 2010). By examining the moderating role of identification with the leader in the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment, our study sheds new light on the importance of leadership in fostering goal alignment within organisations. Our analysis suggests that when employees identify more strongly with their leaders, the negative effect of seniority on normative goal alignment is reduced. This insight can help organisations develop strategies for fostering strong identification with leaders through effective communication, support, and authentic leadership.

Third, our study integrates and builds on the work of Foss and Lindenberg (2013), who proposed a framework for understanding the interplay between normative, gain, and hedonic goals within organisations. By empirically testing the relationship between employee seniority, identification with the leader, and normative goal alignment, our study provides valuable empirical support for the theoretical framework proposed by Foss and Lindenberg (2013) and highlights the importance of considering the different types of goals that may influence employee behaviour and organisational outcomes.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Our study offers theoretical contributions, advancing the existing body of knowledge in the fields of strategic management, organisational behaviour, and leadership. In examining the role of employee seniority and identification with the leader, our focus on normative goal alignment contributes to the literature on goal alignment, which has primarily centred on the alignment of individual and organisational goals (e.g. Locke and Latham 2002).

By revealing the negative relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment, our results highlight the importance of considering employee seniority in the study of goal alignment and organisational effectiveness. This insight adds a previously unexplored aspect of goal alignment to the literature, encouraging researchers to delve deeper into the role of the career stage in organisational goal dynamics.

Additionally, our study expands the literature on the influence of leadership on goal alignment (e.g. Kark *et al.*, 2003; Van Quaquebeke *et al.*, 2010) by examining the moderating role of identification with the leader in the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment. This underscores the importance of fostering strong identification with leaders, thus providing a valuable theoretical contribution to the understanding of leadership and goal alignment.

Furthermore, by building on and providing empirical evidence for the theoretical framework proposed by Foss and Lindenberg (2013), who suggested that employees' behaviours within organisations can be driven by normative, gain, and hedonic goals, our study validates key aspects of this framework, encouraging further research in this area.

5.2 Practical implications

Our study has three main practical implications. First, given the observed negative relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment, organisations should be aware of the potential for goal misalignment as employees advance in their careers. To address this issue, organisations could implement initiatives aimed at reinforcing the importance of normative goals among senior employees. For example, organisations could provide training programmes, workshops, or targeted communications emphasising the significance of normative goals and their connection to organisational success.

Second, our study highlights the critical role of identification with the leader in moderating the relationship between employee seniority and normative goal alignment. Consequently, organisations should strive to foster strong leader-follower relationships. This can be achieved by investing in leadership development programmes that emphasise the importance of interpersonal skills, empathy, and trust-building. Furthermore, organisations could create opportunities for leaders to interact more closely with their subordinates, such as through team-building activities or regular one-on-one meetings. By cultivating strong connections between employees and leaders, organisations can facilitate better goal alignment and improve overall performance.

Third, the validation of Foss and Lindenberg's (2013) theoretical framework on normative, gain, and hedonic goals provides organisations with a useful lens through which to understand and manage employee motivation. Recognising that employees are driven by these different goals, organisations can develop tailored incentives and initiatives to appeal to the diverse motivational drivers of their workforce. By doing so, organisations can more effectively encourage goal alignment and create an environment in which employees can thrive and contribute to the organisation's success.

5.3 Future research avenues

This study offers various avenues for future research. One potential direction for future research includes exploring the impact of other factors on normative goal alignment. Although our study focused on employee seniority and identification with the leader, there could be other factors that affect normative goal alignment. Researchers may consider examining the role of organisational culture, communication styles, and various individual differences, such as personality traits or values.

Another avenue for future research could be to investigate the effect of normative goal alignment on a wider range of organisational outcomes, such as employee performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of normative goal alignment within organisations. Additionally, future research could expand the context of this study by examining normative goal alignment in different industries, countries, and cultures. By doing so, researchers can determine whether the relationships observed in this study are generalisable across various settings or are specific to the context of the manufacturing industry in Northeast Italy.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the dynamic nature of normative goal alignment and its impact on organisational outcomes over time. Longitudinal designs would enable researchers to examine how changes in employee seniority, leadership, and other factors may affect goal alignment and its consequences. Finally, future research could explore the potential role of technology in facilitating or hindering normative goal alignment. As organisations increasingly adopt digital tools and platforms to support communication and collaboration, it would be valuable to examine how such technologies may influence the alignment of goals between employees and their managers.

6. Conclusion and limitations

This study has provided insights into the role of employee seniority and identification with the leader in shaping normative goal alignment between employees and their managers. Our results contribute to the existing literature by demonstrating the importance of these factors in enhancing normative goal alignment, which, in turn, can lead to better organisational outcomes. The results also highlight practical implications for organisations, emphasising the need for managers to be aware of the impact of employee seniority and identification with the leader on goal alignment and to take appropriate steps to ensure effective alignment.

However, our study is not without its limitations. First, the research was conducted within the specific context of the manufacturing industry in Northeast Italy. This may limit the generalisability of our results to other industries, countries, and cultures. Future research could address this limitation by exploring normative goal alignment in different contexts.

Second, the cross-sectional design of our study does not allow for causal inferences or an examination of the dynamic nature of goal alignment. Longitudinal research designs would be more suitable for investigating the causal relationships between variables and changes in normative goal alignment over time.

Lastly, our study focused on employee seniority and identification with the leader as key factors influencing normative goal alignment. Future research could consider incorporating additional factors to provide a more detailed understanding of the determinants of normative goal alignment in organisations.

Despite these limitations, we hope this study could constitute a step forward in understanding the dynamics behind normative goal alignment by providing additional evidence on the interplay between different goals and different hierarchical levels inside organisations.

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