

# When Leader Self-Care Begets Other Care: Leader Role Self-Compassion and Helping at Work

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Integrating research on self-compassion with leader identity theory, we propose that leader role self-compassion—a mindset in which a leader takes a supportive, kind, and nonjudgmental stance toward himself or herself in relation to challenges faced in a leader role—matters for subsequent leader behaviors and stakeholder perceptions by strengthening leader identity. To test these theoretical ideas, we developed and tested a leader role self-compassion intervention in two field experiments. In the first field experiment, we show that on days when leaders engage in leader role self-compassion, they help others more with both task-related and personal problems because they identify more strongly with their leader role. Consequently, on such days, stakeholders perceive these leaders as more competent and civil. In exploratory analyses, we also find that these effects are stronger for leaders with lower (vs. higher) structural power, suggesting that novice leaders may benefit more from leader role self-compassion. In the second field experiment, we conceptually replicate the effect of the leader role self-compassion intervention on leader identity and establish the distinctiveness of this intervention from other types of interventions. We discuss implications for theory and research.

*Keywords:* leader identity, helping, self-compassion, power, leadership

We are inevitably knocked on our a\*s by the demands of leading. And when we make mistakes—when we fail to lead—our identity; our sense of self; our self-esteem; our deeply held beliefs about what it will take to feel loved and safe and that we belong, as well as the most basic ability to provide for ourselves and our loved ones, seems to implode. All too often we break down in the work of becoming a CEO, a manager, a leader.

—Jerry Colona, 2019

American Venture Capitalist, Founder & CEO  
Reboot: Leadership and the Art of Growing Up

Leaders serve important functions within their organizations, as they direct the day-to-day activities of their teams while pursuing strategic goals (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kotter, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the key role that leaders play in organizational life, the management field has devoted much-deserved attention to effective leadership (Badura et al., 2020; DeRue et al., 2011; van Knippenberg, 2020). For the most part, the leadership literature depicts leaders as larger-than-life figures who are rarely intimidated by the responsibilities of their leadership roles (Hackman & Wageman, 2007; Meindl et al., 1985;

Newark, 2018). This optimistic perspective, however, stands in stark contrast to survey data showing that leaders find their leadership role to be quite challenging and stressful. For example, in line with the quote above by Jerry Colona, data suggest that most people in formal positions of organizational authority (88%) find leading to be the most stressful part of their job (Campbell et al., 2006). At the same time, “being recognized as a leader” remains a top 10 concern for many people holding positions of leadership (Gentry et al., 2014, 2016).

The notion that leadership is challenging has received some recent attention in the academic literature (Pindek et al., 2020). For example, Maxwell (2020, p. 8) wrote that “leadership is hard work. There are no two consecutive easy days in the life of leaders. If today is easy, you know how tomorrow will probably go.” Given these insights, it is important to identify tools that may help leaders to effectively navigate their challenging role day-to-day. Drawing from research on self-compassion, we propose that taking a self-compassionate perspective on one’s leader role is an effective tool for leaders because engaging in self-compassion in a given context strengthens individuals’ abilities to persevere in that context (Germer & Neff, 2019; Leary et al., 2007). Building on these ideas, we posit that leader role self-compassion—taking a supportive, kind, and nonjudgmental stance toward oneself in relation to the challenges one faces as a leader—may render leaders more effective day-to-day at work. Integrating research on self-compassion with leader identity theory (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), we build a theoretical model that explains how leader role self-compassion motivates effective leader behaviors and, in turn, stimulates positive

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “leader” to refer to a person holding a formal position of authority over a set of subordinates in an organization. Scholars suggest that actual leadership in such roles is variable (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019).

stakeholder perceptions by strengthening (i.e., making salient or activating) daily leader identity.

Specifically, our theoretical model proposes that on days when leaders take a self-compassionate stance toward their leader role, they approach themselves with kindness and patience in that role, seeing the inherent hardships of leading not as an indictment of their leadership (e.g., that they are not really a leader if things are this challenging), but as a normal part of the leader role. Taking a self-compassionate stance is likely to matter for leaders' subsequent behaviors and stakeholder evaluations because with it, individuals feel more comfortable holding "leader" as an identity and, therefore, strive to fulfill identity-relevant responsibilities (e.g., Day et al., 2009). Key leadership responsibilities include providing task direction and emotional support to others at work in the form of helping with task-related and personal issues (Burke, 1982; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Lanaj & Jennings, 2020). Leaders are approached for and expected to help often at work (Toegel et al., 2013), and they engage in both forms of helping daily (Lanaj & Jennings, 2020). Therefore, task-related and personal helping are useful indicators of the fulfillment of task and relational leadership responsibilities, respectively, that may be enacted in response to leader role self-compassion.

Helping with task-related and personal problems shows to others that leaders are engaged at work and care for those in their workgroup, signaling to others that the supervisor is enacting the leader part of the position by being other- rather than self-focused (e.g., Quinn & Spreitzer, 2006). Indeed, being other-focused is indicative that one has entered what Quinn (2005) calls "the fundamental state of leadership"—a state where one is truly leading rather than simply holding a designated leader position. These ideas suggest that stakeholders may evaluate leaders who help with task and personal problems more positively. Stakeholders expect leaders to be both competent and civil in their interactions with others at work (e.g., Gabriel, 2015), and for these reasons, we conceptualize these evaluations as markers of leader effectiveness. In its entirety, therefore, leader role self-compassion may benefit stakeholders because they gain valuable task and personal resources from the help that they receive from leaders. At the same time, leader role self-compassion may benefit leaders because they are ultimately viewed as more effective by their stakeholders due to the help that they provide.

Theory suggests that the downstream effects of leader role self-compassion via leader identity may depend on one's hierarchical position in the organization (e.g., Day et al., 2009; Lord & Hall, 2005). The directionality of these effects, however, is uncertain. On the one hand, leaders higher in structural power may find the leader role less challenging and thus face fewer threats to their leader identity, both because they have capably survived leadership hardships in the past and because their high positions afford them the resources needed to manage leadership hardships. Leader role self-compassion, therefore, may not be as imperative for these leaders. On the other hand, leaders with more structural power have wider-ranging and higher-stakes responsibilities and potentially face more challenging situations at work than leaders at lower levels of the organization. Leader role self-compassion, therefore, may be particularly beneficial for leaders at higher levels of the organization. Since both perspectives are plausible, we investigate the moderating role of structural power as a research question.

Our work offers several contributions to theory and practice. First, the majority of the leadership research focuses on understanding

what happens to others as a function of leaders' actions, with little attention paid to leaders' own experiences (Lanaj et al., 2019). We take a broader perspective by investigating the implications that leader role self-compassion has for leaders' own behaviors as well as for stakeholders' evaluations of these leaders as mediated by leader identity. Specifically, we show that the leader role self-compassion intervention has broad-ranging relevance in organizational settings because it benefits not only followers by motivating effective leader behaviors, but also the leaders themselves by promoting positive follower evaluations of the leader. Second, by designing and testing a leader role self-compassion intervention across two experiments, we respond to calls for wise interventions that change how people see themselves and act (Brockner & Sherman, 2019; Walton & Wilson, 2018), and therefore, we provide a practical tool that is beneficial to leaders and to their organizations. Finally, we respond to calls for within-person investigations of leadership (McClellan et al., 2019), acknowledging that all employees—including those in formal positions of authority such as the ones we study here—may have "moments when they behave in a more or less leader-like way" (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019, p. 456).

### Leader Role Self-Compassion and Leader Helping: The Role of Leader Identity

Existing self-compassion research indicates that people may benefit from taking a self-compassionate stance in challenging environments that have implications for their sense of self (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Germer & Neff, 2019), and we suggest that leadership is one such context. Engaging in leader role self-compassion may be helpful for leaders because their days are trying and complex (Lanaj et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2020) and, as Germer (2009, p. 2) noted, "A moment of self-compassion . . . can change your entire day." Therefore, adopting a daily mindset of self-compassion toward oneself as a leader—what we call *leader role self-compassion*—may help people in positions of leadership to better fulfill their work responsibilities.

Self-compassion is an effective daily resource for leaders because it enables cognitive restructuring—the reframing of a challenging situation in more positive terms (e.g., Allen & Leary, 2010; Gnilka et al., 2017; Yoo & Lee, 2005)—by nudging leaders to be kind and gracious to themselves in relation to challenges in their leader role. Instead of changing the underlying meaning of an experience, cognitive restructuring reframes an experience by drawing one's attention to a fuller understanding of it. Therefore, thoughts of "leadership is challenging" are restructured to "leadership challenges are a normal part of the leader role" (e.g., Deepak, 2019).

By engaging in leader role self-compassion, leaders may regard leadership hardships as "just part of the role" and view them with an attitude of appreciation and understanding rather than as a threat to their leadership abilities, making it easier to view themselves as a leader on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, recent research suggests that self-compassion helps reduce feelings of inadequacy and enables acceptance of one's flaws (Patzak et al., 2017; Zhang, Chen, et al., 2020). Applied to our context, these ideas suggest that leader role self-compassion may reduce fears of failure in the leader role, nudging those holding formal positions of authority to more willingly and readily include "leader" as an identity descriptor that day. Thus, leader role self-compassion may enhance leader identity by

making leaders feel more comfortable adopting the leader role despite some of the challenges inherent to this role.

Furthermore, exercising leadership involves interpersonal, image, and instrumental risks, and individuals regard leading as more desirable when the risks associated with it are perceived to be low rather than high (Zhang, Nahrgang, et al., 2020). As leader role self-compassion may reduce fears of failure in the leader role, it may lessen the image threat concerns that tend to keep employees from identifying with the leader role (e.g., Zhang, Nahrgang, et al., 2020). Instead, on days when leaders engage in leader role self-compassion, they are reminded that the risks associated with leading are part of the larger leader experience and that, despite their role hardships and complexities, they can overcome potential hurdles and succeed as a leader (e.g., Barnard & Curry, 2011). Leader role self-compassion, therefore, may be beneficial to leader identity because it normalizes risks associated with the leader role and reminds leaders of their value in the organization, motivating them to identify even more closely with this role.

Beyond normalizing failure and risk, approaching oneself with self-compassion enhances one's desire to improve and learn in challenging environments (Breines & Chen, 2012; Zhang & Chen, 2016). Engaging in leader role self-compassion may help leaders view leading more positively because they are motivated to grow in this role (e.g., Breines & Chen, 2012; Courtright et al., 2014; Germer & Neff, 2019; Neff, 2009; Patzak et al., 2017), thereby increasing their identification with the leader role. Thus, taking a self-compassionate stance toward challenges in one's leader role may make leader identity feel more salient and comfortable for leaders, encouraging them to embrace it more readily. Hence, we propose:

*Hypothesis 1:* Leader role self-compassion will enhance leader identity.

According to leader identity theory, when leaders identify strongly with their leader role, they experience heightened motivation to pursue leader-related responsibilities (e.g., Day & Sin, 2011; Ibarra et al., 2014; Lord & Hall, 2005). This occurs because when an identity is activated, a person tends to pursue goals that are congruent with that identity (Lord et al., 2016; Lord & Hall, 2005; Oyserman et al., 2014; Rus et al., 2010). Drawing on leader identity theory, we expect that an enhanced leader identity due to leader role self-compassion will prompt leaders to fulfill key leadership responsibilities, as this identity facilitates a better perspective of what is needed of leaders that day (e.g., Day & Harrison, 2007; Day et al., 2009; DeRue et al., 2009).

Leadership research suggests that leaders fulfill two key responsibilities in their organizations—they provide task direction and psychological support to their units (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Although leaders may accomplish these two work responsibilities in a number of ways, recent work suggests that at the day level, they are often fulfilled through helping others in the workplace (Lanaj & Jennings, 2020), which is a common day-to-day activity for most leaders (Burke et al., 1976; Lanaj & Jennings, 2020; Toegel et al., 2013). Leaders often help with both task-related and personal issues. Task-related helping refers to assisting with work-related problems, such as addressing client demands or assisting with technical issues. Personal helping, on the other hand, refers to assisting with

emotional and nonwork issues, such as listening with empathy to intimate disclosures or providing advice on private matters.

Identified leaders are more likely to help because when people see themselves as leaders, they “are more likely to seek out opportunities to exhibit leadership” (Ashford & DeRue, 2012, p. 148), and leaders feel responsible for others' performance and well-being (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2008). Indeed, research on power indicates that people in positions of organizational leadership feel a sense of responsibility for the outcomes of the group, which motivates them to be responsive to the needs of others (Tost, 2015; Tost & Johnson, 2019). Thus, when leaders identify strongly with their leader role because of leader role self-compassion, they may become more aware of others' dependence on them and be motivated to help others more. Supporting this idea, Tost and Johnson (2019) found that leaders who felt responsible for their team experienced a stronger bond of solidarity and helped their team members more. Similarly, Lanaj et al. (2021) found that on days when leaders identified more strongly with their leader role, they put the interests of their workgroup above their own and self-sacrificed more. When leaders identify strongly with their leader role, they may help more also because their sense of self becomes inclusive with that of others at work (Day & Harrison, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005), such that others' concerns become their concerns. In all, these arguments indicate that on days when leaders experience higher leader identity because of leader role self-compassion, they will help more with both task-related and personal issues. Hence, we propose the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Leader identity will be positively related to leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal issues.

*Hypothesis 3:* Leader role self-compassion will be positively related to leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal issues via leader identity.

## The Downstream Effects of Leader Role Self-Compassion on Stakeholder Perceptions

To be effective at work, leaders need to rely on multiple stakeholders, including their boss, peers, and subordinates (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Tsui & Ashford, 1994), who can provide or withhold important resources, and leaders regularly exert both upward and downward influence in their roles (e.g., Ahearn et al., 2014). Thus, as leaders interact with multiple stakeholders on a day-to-day basis to accomplish their goals, stakeholders' ratings of leader effectiveness provide a holistic assessment of leaders' day-to-day performance (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Tsui, 1984). Stakeholders expect leaders to be both competent in how they handle their daily work tasks as well as caring in how they communicate and interact with their colleagues (Gabriel, 2015; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015). Expectations for leaders to be competent and civil likely arise from moralized notions of leadership, where people believe that it is right and moral for those in positions of power to go beyond the call of duty by self-sacrificing their interests for the betterment of the group (e.g., Hoogervorst et al., 2012; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005). Echoing these sentiments, scholars have noted that leaders need to strike a good balance between acting competently while showing humility (Rao & Sutton, 2020; Sutton, 2010), and that they need to “remain humble

and human” while exerting leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 339). For these reasons, we conceptualize competence and civility as indicators that leaders were seen as being effective by stakeholders that day at work.

Drawing from our integrated framework, we expect that on days when leaders help with task-related and personal problems because of leader role self-compassion and heightened leader identity, they will be seen as more competent and more civil by their stakeholders. Helping with work-related issues conveys that leaders possess the capabilities and resources to assist coworkers in need and that they are willing to put aside their own work to be available to others. Thus, on days when leaders help with work-related issues, they may be perceived as acting with skill and ability and thus as more competent by their stakeholders. Furthermore, leaders’ willingness to put in time and effort to help colleagues who approach them with task-related requests conveys that they are acting with empathy, care, and friendliness (e.g., Porath et al., 2015; Sturm et al., 2017), prompting their colleagues to see them as more civil. Supporting these ideas, research indicates that employees who help others with their work tend to be seen as more effective and prosocial (Grant & Mayer, 2009; Podsakoff et al., 2009) and to receive more gratitude (Lee et al., 2019), suggesting that their help was appreciated by their colleagues. For these reasons, we expect that task-related helping will be positively related to stakeholder ratings of leader competence and leader civility. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4:* Leader helping with task-related issues will be positively associated with stakeholder ratings of (a) leader competence and (b) leader civility.

In addition to helping with work-related problems, leaders often assist with personal issues at work (Burke et al., 1976; Lanaj & Jennings, 2020; Moberg, 1990; Toegel et al., 2013). When leaders help with personal issues, it conveys to their various stakeholders that they have the resource breadth and desire to both accomplish work tasks and to care for the well-being of others. Employees tend to view helping with personal issues as part of leaders’ work responsibilities (e.g., Toegel et al., 2013), and therefore, leaders who help with personal issues may be evaluated as more competent by their stakeholders. Furthermore, a willingness to respond to help requests with personal issues demonstrates friendliness and approachability. Leaders are pulled in a number of different directions at work, and their decision to pause to help with personal issues communicates that they see their colleagues as worthy of empathy, compassion, and attention (e.g., Hafenbrack et al., 2020). As such, their stakeholders are likely to view leaders as particularly civil on days when they help with personal problems. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5:* Leader helping with personal issues will be positively associated with stakeholder ratings of (a) leader competence and (b) leader civility.

So far, we have argued that leader role self-compassion normalizes challenges inherent to the leader role, thus nudging leaders to help more by fostering a stronger connection to their leader role. In turn, we posited that stakeholders will view leader helping as reflecting leader competence and civility because helping is seen by others as a marker of high performance and of making a positive

difference (Ford et al., 2018; Podsakoff et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2018). Our expectations that leader role self-compassion matters for how leaders behave and for how they are subsequently evaluated align well with prior research on self-compassion suggesting that when people take a self-compassionate perspective, they have enhanced motivation to improve in the face of difficulties (Breines & Chen, 2012) and to exhibit more concern for others (Neff & Germer, 2013; Neff & Pommier, 2013). Putting all these arguments together, we propose:

*Hypothesis 6:* Leader role self-compassion will be positively related to stakeholder ratings of leader competence via leader identity and leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal issues.

*Hypothesis 7:* Leader role self-compassion will be positively related to stakeholder ratings of leader civility via leader identity and leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal issues.

### Research Question: Does Structural Power Matter?

Leader identity theory suggests that one’s position in the organizational hierarchy matters for how one identifies as a leader because holding a position of authority signifies a strong granting of leader identity by the organization (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Therefore, structural power—which is “based on formal organizational structure and hierarchical authority” (Finkelstein, 1992, p. 508)—may matter in determining how leader role self-compassion impacts leader identity. Theory, however, is inconclusive about whether structural power may *weaken or strengthen* the effect of leader role self-compassion on leader identity.

One line of thought suggests that leaders with higher structural power may benefit *the least* from leader role self-compassion because, as incumbents of higher positions, they have been reinforced for claiming a leader identity and have likely been granted this identity across multiple leadership positions in the hierarchy (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Thus, their leader identity may be rather stable and, as such, less affected by leader role self-compassion. Furthermore, successful leadership experiences facilitate promotion to senior positions (Dragoni et al., 2014), suggesting that leaders higher in structural power may have both the expertise and capabilities needed to weather the diverse leadership challenges that may come their way, rendering a mindset of leader role self-compassion less relevant for them.

This same line of thought suggests that leaders lower in structural power may benefit the most from leader role self-compassion because they find their jobs to be stressful and challenging (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017b; Prins et al., 2015), and with their lack of experience, their leader identity is more tenuous. As such, taking a leader role self-compassionate perspective may especially help them to embrace their leader role, as this mindset normalizes role challenges (e.g., Leary et al., 2007). Leaders lower in structural power are also particularly sensitive to the risks of leading (e.g., Anicich & Hirsh, 2017a, 2017b; Zhang, Nahrgang, et al., 2020), but leader role self-compassion may lessen the perceived risks associated with enacting leadership. Thus, the effects of leader role self-compassion on leader identity may be stronger for leaders lower in structural power (vs. those higher up in the organizational hierarchy).



An alternative line of thought, however, indicates that leaders higher in structural power may benefit *the most* from leader role self-compassion because they face more complex demands and make higher-impact decisions (i.e., setting strategic goals, pursuing high-risk endeavors to gain market share) than those lower in the hierarchy, suggesting that they may face more substantial threats to their leader identity. Given the high-stakes nature of their work, and thus the potential for leadership failures to have serious ramifications for others (e.g., losing business may mean downsizing), leader role self-compassion may be particularly beneficial to those higher up in the organization because it normalizes their more significant leadership challenges, allowing these leaders to identify more readily with their leader role despite them. As there are theoretical reasons to expect that structural power may either weaken or strengthen the effect of leader role self-compassion on leader identity, we pose the following research question:

*Research Question:* Does structural power weaken or strengthen the effect of leader role self-compassion on leader identity?

## Study 1

### Participants

We invited 77 formal leaders and up to three people with whom they had regular contact in their work unit (stakeholders) to participate in our research. Leaders were enrolled in an executive education program in India, and they received extra credit for participating in our study. We paid stakeholders \$10 for participating in our study. Sixty-eight leaders and 112 of their stakeholders provided useable data and were included in the final sample. The majority of leaders were male (83.8%), their average age was 34.4 years old ( $SD = 5.7$ ), their average job tenure was 5.9 years ( $SD = 5.2$ ), and their average organizational tenure was 5.1 years ( $SD = 3.6$ ). They worked an average of 9.4 hr a day ( $SD = 1.5$ ) and an average of 46.9 hr a week ( $SD = 11.4$ ), and they had an average of nine direct reports ( $SD = 12$ ). Sample job titles were engineering manager, vice president of sales, and manager of project engineering.

The majority of stakeholders were male (80%), their average age was 31.9 years old ( $SD = 7.2$ ), their average job tenure was 5.3 years ( $SD = 5.2$ ), and their average organizational tenure was 5.1 years ( $SD = 5.5$ ). They worked an average of 8.9 hr a day ( $SD = 1.2$ ) and 44.6 hr a week ( $SD = 13.9$ ). Job titles included software engineer, developer, and operations executive. The stakeholders were a mix of peers of the leader (45.5%), direct reports (36.6%), supervisors (8.0%), and other (9.8%; most write-ins to “other” were “manager,” “colleague,” and “team lead”). We collected Study 1 data in November and December of 2018.

### Procedure

We ran our study over a period of 3 weeks and used [Qualtrics.com](https://www.qualtrics.com) to host surveys. Initially, we sent leaders an opt-in survey that included the consent form, demographic questions, a measure of structural power, and a place to nominate three stakeholders with whom they had regular contact at work and who might be willing to participate in our research. As per our Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines (institution: University of Florida; title: Daily

behaviors and attitudes study; number: 201802678), we asked leaders to receive stakeholders’ permission before sharing their contact information with us, and stakeholder data were kept confidential and not shared with leaders. Our research team directly contacted the nominated stakeholders to participate in the study.

About a week later, we started the daily portion of our study. To leaders, we sent three surveys a day in the morning (7 a.m.), afternoon (4 p.m.), and evening (8 p.m.), Monday to Friday, for 10 consecutive workdays.<sup>2</sup> In the morning, leaders completed the leader role self-compassion intervention or a control task (described below), a measure of leader identity, and measures of positive and negative affect as control variables. In the afternoon survey, leaders completed measures of task-related helping and personal helping. On average, the leaders completed their morning survey at 8:30 a.m. and their afternoon survey at 4:59 p.m. The average time elapsed between morning and afternoon survey completion was 8.5 hr ( $SD = 1.2$ ). We retained participants who followed instructions (e.g., completed the writing intervention or control prompt) and provided at least 3 complete days of surveys, which allows for proper modeling of within-person variance (Singer & Willett, 2003) and is a common practice in experience sampling studies (e.g., Matta et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2016). In all, we received 465 daily observations, for a response rate of 68.4% (6.84 days per leader on average).

To stakeholders, we sent one survey per day at 4 p.m. for the same 10 workdays, measuring daily leader competence and civility. Stakeholders submitted their responses on average at 5:29 p.m. each day. To ensure that stakeholders were able to appropriately rate leaders’ competence and civility, we asked them to indicate how much interaction they had with the leader that day (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*). We discarded responses in which the stakeholder answered “not at all.” We received usable daily stakeholder data for 75% of our leaders, and an average of 2.20 stakeholders ( $SD = 0.83$ ) provided data for each leader.<sup>3</sup>

### Leader Role Self-Compassion Intervention

Previous research suggests that a mindset of self-compassion can be induced by reflecting on past challenges or hardships in a self-compassionate manner (Leary et al., 2007; Zhang & Chen, 2016). Building on this work and research by Neff (2003a, 2003b) on self-compassion, we developed an expressive writing intervention to activate a leader role self-compassion mindset. We included the leader role self-compassion intervention (or control) in the morning survey, and an example of the intervention prompt is: “Please recall a time in which you were understanding and patient toward yourself when experiencing challenges at work because of your role as a

<sup>2</sup> Our model includes data only from the morning and afternoon surveys.

<sup>3</sup> To investigate whether or not leaders were rated differentially by the various groups of stakeholders, we aggregated the peer and supervisor ratings of each leader and the direct report ratings of each leader for each day, and we conducted ANOVAs with rating source (peer/supervisor vs. direct report) as the factor and competence and civility as dependent variables. Our results suggested that the average daily competence rating by peers/supervisors ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) was not significantly different from the average daily rating by direct reports ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ):  $F(1, 307) = 3.48$ ,  $p = .063$ . Similarly, the average daily civility rating by peers/supervisors ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) and by direct reports ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) were not significantly different from each other:  $F(1, 307) = 3.40$ ,  $p = .066$ . In all, these results suggest that the stakeholder groups did not meaningfully differ from each other in their evaluations of leaders.

leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.” Because our leaders participated in the study for 10 consecutive workdays, we developed five versions of the intervention and five versions of the control condition, and participants received a different version each day of the study in random order (please see the [Appendix](#) for complete intervention and control conditions).

We adapted the five control conditions used by [Foulek et al. \(2018\)](#). For example, on a control day, we asked participants to recall “the last activity you did before you went to sleep last night” or “the most recent purchase that you made.” Similar to the intervention condition, we then asked participants to describe the activity and how they felt in 2–5 sentences. We used a constrained matrix such that on each of the study days, half of the leaders received an intervention writing prompt and the other half received a control writing prompt in random order. The sequencing of the 10 manipulated and control conditions was unique for each person.<sup>4</sup>

We excluded an explicit manipulation check to minimize the chance that participants would become aware of our study purpose (e.g., [Foulek et al., 2018](#)). Instead, we conducted a post-hoc manipulation check following the procedure described by [Galinsky et al. \(2003\)](#). Specifically, we randomly selected 100 of the participants’ written responses to the intervention and 100 responses to the control conditions and asked two coders who were blind to the purposes of the study and who were not involved with data collection to read each response and to answer the following question: “To what extent is this person describing how they showed themselves compassion when experiencing a difficult time at work as a leader?” (1 = *none at all* to 5 = *a great deal*). Aggregation tests indicated that there was adequate agreement among the two raters. Intraclass Correlation Coefficient [ICC](2) = .75; [LeBreton and Senter \(2008\)](#), and for this reason, we averaged their responses into one overall rating for each written response. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) suggested that participants wrote more about leader role self-compassion in the intervention condition than in the control condition,  $M_{LRSC} = 2.46$ ,  $SD_{LRSC} = 0.99$ ;  $M_{control} = 1.10$ ,  $SD_{control} = 0.25$ ;  $F(1, 198) = 176.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that the leader role self-compassion intervention was successful.

## Measures

### Leader Role Self-Compassion

We dummy coded leader role self-compassion, such that days in the intervention condition were coded as “1” and days in the control condition were coded as “0.”

### Leader Identity

We measured leader identity after the intervention (control) in the morning using a four-item scale adapted from [Lee et al. \(2016\)](#) and published by [Lanaj et al. \(2021\)](#). An example item is: “Right now, I see myself as a leader” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Average reliability was  $\alpha = .88$ . We include all items of all study measures in the [Appendix](#).

### Task-Related Helping

We measured task-related helping in the afternoon with three items adapted from [Settoon and Mossholder \(2002\)](#) and published

by [Lanaj et al. \(2016\)](#). An example item is “Today at work, I went out of my way to help one or more coworkers who asked for my help with work-related problems” (1 = *never* to 6 = *five or more times*). Average reliability was  $\alpha = .91$ .

### Personal Helping

We measured personal helping in the afternoon with three items adapted from [Settoon and Mossholder \(2002\)](#) and published by [Lanaj and Jennings \(2020\)](#). An example item is “Today at work, I helped one or more coworkers who asked for my help with their personal problems and worries” (1 = *never* to 6 = *five or more times*). Average reliability was  $\alpha = .88$ .

### Leader Competence

Each afternoon, stakeholders rated leaders’ competence with six items adapted from [Fiske et al. \(2002\)](#). An example item is “Today at work, <<Leader’s Name>> showed competence” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Average reliability across days and raters was  $\alpha = .96$ .

### Leader Civility

Each afternoon, stakeholders also rated leaders’ daily civility using six items adapted from [Porath et al. \(2015\)](#). An example item is: “Today at work, <<Leader’s Name>> treated me in a caring manner” (1 = *very slightly or not all* to 5 = *very much*). Average reliability across days and raters was  $\alpha = .97$ .

### Structural Power

We measured structural power in the opt-in survey with four items developed by [See et al. \(2011\)](#) and published by [Foulek et al. \(2019\)](#). A sample item is “How much authority do you have over the hiring or firing of staff in your organization?” (1 = *none at all* to 5 = *a lot*). Average reliability was  $\alpha = .80$ .

### Control Variables

To ensure that the effects of the intervention on leader identity were not due to affective states, we controlled for morning positive and negative affect in our analyses (e.g., [Gabriel et al., 2019](#)). In the morning survey, we measured positive and negative affect with five items each, asking participants to rate the extent to which each item captured how they felt at that moment ([Mackinnon et al., 1999](#); [Watson et al., 1988](#)). Sample items are “Enthusiastic” (positive affect) and “Distressed” (negative affect; 1 = *very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *very much*). Average coefficient  $\alpha$ s were .90 and .84 for positive and negative affect, respectively. We also controlled for day of the study (taking values of 1–10), day of the week (taking values

<sup>4</sup> We compared the effects of the five versions of the intervention and of the control condition on leader identity by conducting ANOVAs with intervention or control version as the factor and leader identity as the dependent variable. Following the recommendation of [Hofmann et al. \(2000\)](#), we person-mean centered leader identity due to the nested nature of the data. We found that leader identity did not differ significantly among the five versions of the leader role self-compassion intervention,  $F(4, 206) = .28$ ,  $p = .889$ . Similarly, leader identity did not differ among the five versions of the control condition,  $F(4, 249) = 1.26$ ,  $p = .288$ .

of 1–5), and the sine and cosine of the day of the week to remove potential spurious effects associated with time (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2019; Sonnentag & Starzyk, 2015).<sup>5,6</sup>

### Analytical Approach

We tested all hypotheses simultaneously using multilevel path analyses in Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2013). A null model revealed that there was a considerable amount of variance at the within-person level for all our endogenous variables (leader identity = 42.4%, task-related helping = 56.8%, personal helping = 52.0%, competence = 64.1%, and civility = 67.9%), supporting the use of multilevel modeling. In our analyses, we person-mean centered our Level-1 predictors, which removes between-person variance and allows for appropriate interpretation of within-person associations (Enders & Tofighi, 2007; Hofmann et al., 2000). We grand-mean centered structural power, our between-person moderator (Enders & Tofighi, 2007). Following the recommendation of Beal (2015), we modeled within-person hypothesized associations with random slopes. For model parsimony (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2011), we modeled control paths with fixed slopes. To test multilevel mediation and conditional multilevel mediation, we built on the method described by Preacher et al. (2010) and conducted a Monte Carlo bootstrap simulation with 20,000 replications to build 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) for indirect effects and conditional indirect effects in R (Selig & Preacher, 2008). As recommended for such analyses, we included direct effects from predictors to outcomes (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008). We relied on full information maximum likelihood estimation (Arbuckle, 1996) in Mplus to handle missing data, which estimates model parameters based on all data and is advised for experience sampling work (Beal, 2015) because it correctly estimates standard errors (Larsen, 2011).

We conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analyses to investigate the factor distinctiveness of our variables. At Level 1, we modeled the items for positive affect, negative affect, leader identity, task-related helping, personal helping, leader competence, and leader civility, all loading on their respective factors. Factors were allowed to covary, as is the default in Mplus. Before modeling the items for competence and civility, on days when we had multiple stakeholder ratings for a leader, we aggregated each item across raters. At Level 2, we modeled the items for structural power. We person-mean centered our Level-1 items and grand-mean centered our Level-2 items to account for the nonindependence of our data. The fit statistics for this model were acceptable,  $\chi^2(445) = 648.28, p < .001$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = .95; Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = .94; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .03; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)<sub>within</sub> = .05; SRMR<sub>between</sub> = .06, suggesting that our variables were appropriately modeled.

We compared the model described above to several others using the Satorra–Bentler  $\chi^2$  difference test incorporating the Maximum-Likelihood Restricted scaled correction factors (Satorra & Bentler, 2001). Specifically, we compared our main model to: (a) a model in which the items for task-related and personal helping loaded on a single factor and the rest of the items loaded on their respective constructs, (b) a model in which the task-related and personal helping items loaded on one factor, and the items for leader competence and civility loaded on another factor, with the rest of the items loading on their respective constructs, and (c) a model in

which the items for positive affect and leader identity loaded on one factor and the rest of the items loaded on their respective factors. These analyses revealed that our model fit the data significantly better than these alternative models, Alternative Model 1:  $\chi^2(451) = 832.30, p < .001, CFI = .90, TLI = .89, RMSEA = .04, SRMR_{within} = .06, SRMR_{between} = .06, \Delta\chi^2 = 145.32, \Delta df = 6, p < .001$ ; Alternative Model 2:  $\chi^2(456) = 1648.02, p < .001, CFI = .70, TLI = .67, RMSEA = .08, SRMR_{within} = .10, SRMR_{between} = .06, \Delta\chi^2 = 5139.91, \Delta df = 11, p < .001$ ; Alternative Model 3:  $\chi^2(451) = 978.73, p < .001, CFI = .87, TLI = .85, RMSEA = .05, SRMR_{within} = .07, SRMR_{between} = .06, \Delta\chi^2 = 212.04, \Delta df = 6, p < .001$ , indicating that our constructs are distinct from one another.

### Results

Table 1 summarizes means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables and demographics. Figure 1 presents our conceptual and tested model, and Table 2 presents the results of our multilevel path model, testing all hypotheses simultaneously. Hypothesis 1 posited that leader role self-compassion would be positively associated with leader identity. Supporting Hypothesis 1, leader identity was higher on days when leaders participated in the leader role self-compassion intervention compared to control days ( $\gamma = .12, SE = .05, p = .022$ ). Hypothesis 2 posited that leader identity would be positively related to leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal issues. We found support for this hypothesis, as leader identity was positively related to task-related helping ( $\gamma = .21, SE = .08, p = .010$ ) and personal helping ( $\gamma = .28, SE = .06, p < .001$ ).

Table 3 summarizes the indirect effects of leader role self-compassion on our outcomes. Hypothesis 3 predicted that leader role self-compassion would enhance leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal problems via leader identity. Results in Table 3 show that the indirect effect of the leader role self-compassion intervention on task-related helping via leader identity was  $\gamma = .025$ , and the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (95% CI [.0058, .0585]), supporting Hypothesis 3a. Similarly, the indirect effect of the leader role self-compassion intervention on personal helping via leader identity was  $\gamma = .033$  and significant, as the 95% confidence interval excluded zero (95% CI [.0066, .0708]), supporting Hypothesis 3b.

Hypothesis 4 stated that leader helping with task-related issues would be positively associated with stakeholder ratings of (a) leader competence and (b) leader civility. As Table 2 shows, task-related helping was not related to leader competence ( $\gamma = -.01, SE = .04, p = .858$ ) nor to leader civility ( $\gamma = -.02, SE = .03, p = .476$ ), failing to support Hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 5 predicted that leader helping with personal issues would be positively associated with stakeholder ratings of (a) leader competence and (b) leader civility.

<sup>5</sup> As a robustness check, we estimated another iteration of our model in Mplus adding previous-day values of endogenous variables as control variables. Although we conducted a randomized experiment, previous-day controls lessen potential concerns of reverse causality. The pattern and significance of our results remained unchanged with these additional controls. Results are available from authors upon request.

<sup>6</sup> Our model results are largely robust to the exclusion of control variables, with one minor exception. The relationship between leader identity and task-related helping becomes marginally significant ( $\gamma = .15, SE = .09, p = .093$ ) when all control variables are excluded from the model.



**Table 1**  
Study 1—Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Intervention	0.44	0.17	—	-.04	-.03	-.14	.28*	.31*	.00	.46**	-.11	-.12	.03	-.19	-.21	-.15	.05	.02
2. Positive affect	3.75	0.76	-.01	—	-.32**	.65**	.06	-.02	-.10	-.09	.29*	.28*	.00	-.02	.14	.36**	-.10	.18
3. Negative affect	1.49	0.56	.06	-.05	—	-.16	-.38**	-.23	.17	-.27*	.13	.07	.07	-.17	.16	-.19	.09	-.14
4. Leader identity	3.98	0.63	.10*	.27**	-.17**	—	-.03	.06	-.18	-.11	.34**	.27*	.27	.22	.02	.17	.11	.19
5. Study day	5.11	0.90	-.08	-.06	-.12**	.08	—	.41**	-.15	.37**	-.04	.05	-.14	.01	-.13	-.10	.02	.19
6. Day of week	2.90	0.46	-.05	-.06	-.12**	.10*	.47**	—	-.59**	.65**	.09	.02	-.01	-.20	-.04	.00	.13	.24*
7. Sine	0.05	0.22	.08	.03	.13**	-.12*	-.37**	-.71**	—	-.07	-.20	-.07	-.07	-.06	.05	-.01	-.25*	-.15
8. Cosine	-.004	0.24	.01	-.04	.04	.02	.19**	.46**	.02	—	-.08	-.07	.05	-.22	.03	-.12	-.08	-.01
9. Task-related helping	2.26	0.81	-.03	-.03	.13**	.02	-.23**	-.14**	.11*	-.05	—	.81**	.12	.18	.08	-.11	.17	-.02
10. Personal helping	2.05	0.76	.00	-.01	.21**	.11*	-.22**	-.08	.04	-.06	.51**	—	.18	.20	.14	-.04	.20	.05
11. Civility	4.56	0.45	.01	-.06	.03	.02	-.20**	.01	.04	.01	.02	.12	.45**	.57**	.13	-.21	-.20	-.04
12. Competence	4.56	0.39	.00	-.01	.06	.06	-.13*	.03	-.05	.05	.04	.15*	.13	.06	.06	-.01	.04	.02
13. Structural power	2.99	0.88	-.21	.14	.16	.02	-.13	-.04	.05	.03	.08	.14	.13	.06	—	.09	-.20	-.17
14. Leader age	34.42	5.70	-.15	.36**	-.19	.17	-.10	.00	-.01	-.12	-.11	-.04	-.21	-.01	.09	-.21	-.21	.37**
15. Leader gender	0.16	0.37	.05	-.10	.02	.11	.02	.13	-.25*	-.08	.17	.07	-.20	.04	-.20	-.21	—	-.08
16. Leader job tenure	5.90	5.18	.02	.18	-.14	.19	.19	.24*	-.15	-.01	-.02	.05	-.04	.02	-.17	.37**	-.08	—

Note. Pairwise Level-1  $n = 268-465$ . Pairwise Level-2  $n = 51-68$ . Variables 1-12 are Level-1 variables. Correlations for variables 1-12 reported below the diagonal are based on person-mean centered scores. Correlations for variables 13-16 reported above the diagonal are based on between-person scores, where Level-1 variables were aggregated to Level 2. Variables 13-16 are Level-2 variables, and all correlations for variables 13-16 are based on between-person scores. Means and standard deviations are based on between-person scores. Gender: 1 = female, 0 = male. Job tenure is measured in years. Intervention = leader role self-compassion intervention (1 = intervention day, 0 = control day).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Supporting Hypothesis 5, personal helping was positively related to both leader competence ( $\gamma = .08, SE = .04, p = .043$ ) and leader civility ( $\gamma = .08, SE = .04, p = .034$ ).

Hypothesis 6 predicted that the leader role self-compassion intervention would enhance stakeholder ratings of leader competence via leader identity and leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal issues. We found partial support for Hypothesis 6. The indirect effect of the leader role self-compassion intervention on leader competence via leader identity and leader task-related helping was  $\gamma = .000$  and not significant (95% CI [-.0027, .0015]), failing to support Hypothesis 6a, whereas its indirect via leader identity and personal helping was  $\gamma = .003$  and significant (95% CI [.0002, .0088]), supporting Hypothesis 6b. Hypothesis 7 predicted that leader role self-compassion would enhance stakeholder ratings of leader civility via leader identity and leader helping with (a) task-related and (b) personal issues. The indirect effect of the leader role self-compassion intervention on leader civility via leader identity and task-related helping was  $\gamma = -.001$  and not significant (95% CI [-.0030, .0006]), failing to support Hypothesis 7a, but its indirect effect on leader civility via leader identity and personal helping was  $\gamma = .003$  and significant (95% CI [.0004, .0087]), supporting Hypothesis 7b.

Our research question investigated whether structural power would strengthen or weaken the effects of leader role self-compassion on leader identity. The interaction effect of the intervention with structural power was negative and significant ( $\gamma = -.11, SE = .05, p = .033$ ), and Figure 2 depicts this association. We conducted simple slope analyses following the procedure recommended by Preacher et al. (2006) and found that the effect of the intervention on leader identity was stronger for leaders who were lower (-1 SD;  $\gamma = .21, SE = .08, p = .010$ ) versus higher (+1 SD) in structural power ( $\gamma = .02, SE = .05, p = .611$ ). Structural power also moderated the significant indirect effects of the intervention on outcomes, as summarized in Table 4. These analyses suggest that leaders who are lower in the organizational ladder benefit more from leader role self-compassion than more senior leaders. We revisit these findings in the discussion.

Finally, to ascertain the practical relevance of our findings, we calculated the overall variance explained by our model for our focal variables. We calculated the percentage of Level-1 variance explained for each outcome variable using the formula of Bryk and Raudenbush (1992; level-1 variance explained =  $[(\sigma_{\text{null}}^2 - \sigma_{\text{predicted}}^2) / \sigma_{\text{null}}^2]$ ), and we found that our overall model explained 14% of the within-person variance in leader identity, 5% of the within-person variance in task-related helping, 8% of the within-person variance in personal helping, 3% of the within-person variance in leader competence, and 4% of the within-person variance in leader civility.

## Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to compare the effect of our leader role self-compassion intervention on leader identity to the effects of (a) a general self-compassion intervention and (b) a leader challenges intervention. This study allowed us to further assess our theoretical claims that leaders will experience an enhanced leader identity when they reflect on past role challenges with a mindset of self-compassion, thus showing discriminant validity for our intervention compared to other interventions. Specifically, we examined whether our intervention had stronger effects on leader identity



**Table 2**  
Study 1—Simultaneous Multilevel Path Model Results

Predictor	Leader identity (Morning)		Task-related helping (Afternoon)		Personal helping (Afternoon)		Competence (Afternoon— Stakeholders)		Civility (Afternoon— Stakeholders)	
	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	3.98**	(.08)	1.42**	(.33)	0.96**	(.23)	4.41**	(.13)	4.41**	(.12)
Level-2 predictor										
Structural power	.01	(.09)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Level-1 predictors										
Intervention	.12*	(.05)	-.12	(.08)	-.07	(.08)	.00	(.07)	-.01	(.08)
Positive affect	.29**	(.07)	-.12	(.09)	-.10	(.08)	-.04	(.06)	-.10	(.07)
Negative affect	-.15	(.08)	.21	(.14)	.38**	(.12)	.05	(.07)	.01	(.08)
Study day	.01	(.01)	-.06**	(.02)	-.06**	(.02)	-.03*	(.01)	-.04**	(.01)
Day of week	.00	(.03)	-.03	(.05)	.02	(.04)	-.02	(.03)	.03	(.04)
Sine	-.07	(.05)	.00	(.09)	-.01	(.06)	-.09	(.05)	.01	(.07)
Cosine	.02	(.04)	.01	(.07)	-.05	(.07)	.08	(.06)	.03	(.05)
Leader identity	—	—	.21*	(.08)	.28**	(.06)	.06	(.05)	.07	(.06)
Task-related helping	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.01	(.04)	-.02	(.03)
Personal helping	—	—	—	—	—	—	.08*	(.04)	.08*	(.04)
Cross-level moderator										
Structural Power $\times$ Intervention	-.11*	(.05)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

*Note.* Level-1  $n = 465$ . Level-2  $n = 68$ . We centered Level-1 variables at each person's mean; we grand-mean centered structural power. Study day takes values 1–10, corresponding to the day of the study. Day of the week takes values 1–5, corresponding to Monday–Friday. *SE* = standard error. We modeled control variables and nonhypothesized paths as fixed effects and hypothesized paths as random effects. We report unstandardized effects in the table. Intervention = leader role self-compassion intervention (1 = intervention day, 0 = control day).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

compared to a general self-compassion intervention where leaders were induced to take a self-compassionate mindset that was not specific to their leader role, and to a leader role challenges intervention where leaders reflected on past challenges in their leader role but were not instructed to also take a self-compassionate perspective.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

We conducted a between-person experiment with 395 leaders, whom we recruited from Mechanical Turk and paid \$2 for their participation, and this study was approved by the University of Florida IRB (title: Leader Interventions; number: 201902455). To be eligible, an individual had to be a full-time organizational leader and live and work in the United States. We assessed whether participants were leaders with a screening question at the beginning

of the survey: “Do you supervise employees in your current job?” Individuals who did not meet our eligibility requirements were screened out of the survey. Furthermore, to ensure the integrity of our data and following best practices for online data collection (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2021; Meade & Craig, 2012), we interspersed attention checks in the survey (i.e., “please select strongly agree for this item”). We removed 11 participants who failed attention checks, and therefore, our final sample consisted of 384 leaders. Fifty-nine percent of the sample was male, participants' average age was 36.2 years ( $SD = 9.8$ ), their average job tenure was 6.1 years ( $SD = 5.2$ ), they had an average of 9.3 direct reports ( $SD = 14.6$ ), and they worked an average of 43.0 hr per week ( $SD = 7.6$ ). Participants held a variety of leadership positions such as accounting manager, lab manager, and IT manager. We randomly assigned leaders into four conditions: a leader role self-compassion condition (93 participants), a general self-compassion condition (without referencing the leader role; 96 participants), a leader challenges

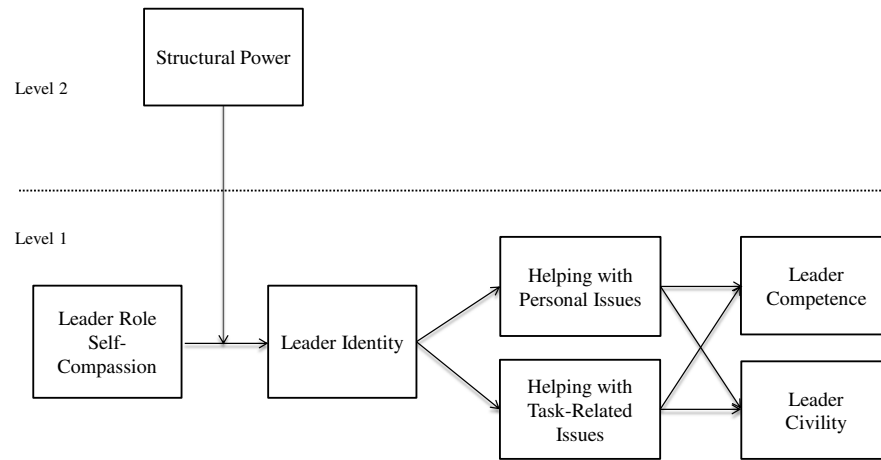
**Table 3**  
Study 1—Results of Indirect Effects From Multilevel Path Analysis

Indirect effect	Estimate	95% CI
Leader role self-compassion $\rightarrow$ Task-related helping (via leader identity)	.025*	[.0058, .0585]
Leader role self-compassion $\rightarrow$ Personal helping (via leader identity)	.033*	[.0066, .0708]
Leader role self-compassion $\rightarrow$ Competence (via leader identity and task-related helping)	.000	[-.0027, .0015]
Leader role self-compassion $\rightarrow$ Competence (via leader identity and personal helping)	.003*	[.0002, .0088]
Leader role self-compassion $\rightarrow$ Civility (via leader identity and task-related helping)	-.001	[-.0030, .0006]
Leader role self-compassion $\rightarrow$ Civility (via leader identity and personal helping)	.003*	[.0004, .0087]

*Note.* Bias-corrected indirect effect confidence intervals are based on 20,000 Monte Carlo bootstrap samples in *R*. CI = confidence interval. All indirect effects were calculated simultaneously, accounting for direct effects.

\*  $p < .05$ .

**Figure 1**  
*Hypothesized Model*



condition (without referencing self-compassion; 99 participants), and a control condition (96 participants). We collected Study 2 data in October of 2019.

**Interventions**

The interventions for the leader role self-compassion and control conditions were identical to those in Study 1. To create the general self-compassion and the leader challenges interventions, we modified the instructions of the leader role self-compassion intervention (see the Appendix for all conditions). As an example, in the general self-compassion intervention, we asked our participants to “Please recall a time in which you were understanding and patient toward yourself when experiencing challenges. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.” Thus, the general self-compassion intervention instructions were identical to the leader role self-compassion intervention instructions except for the omission of the “at work because of your role as a leader” part of the prompt. An example of the leader challenges intervention was

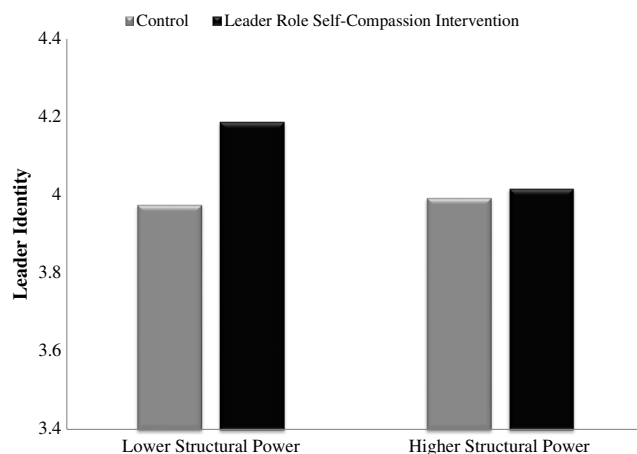
“Please recall a time in which you experienced challenges at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.” Thus, the leader challenges intervention instructions were identical to the leader role self-compassion intervention instructions except for the part of the prompt encouraging leaders to think of these challenges in a self-compassionate manner. As in Study 1, there were five different versions of each condition. Participants were first randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and then to one of the five versions of the prompt within their condition. For the analyses, we collapsed participants across prompt versions for each condition. We measured leader identity with the same measure as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Results**

We first ran a one-way ANOVA with manipulated condition as the factor (the conditions were leader role self-compassion, general self-compassion, leader challenges, and control), and leader identity as the dependent variable. We found that there was a significant difference in leader identity among the four conditions,  $F(3, 380) = 3.59, p = .014$ . Therefore, we conducted a series of planned pairwise comparisons between our leader role self-compassion intervention and the other conditions using independent samples *t* tests. Participants in our leader role self-compassion intervention reported a higher level of leader identity ( $M = 4.19, SD = 0.65$ ) than those in the control condition,  $M = 3.85, SD = 0.77; t(187) = 3.28, p = .001$ , the general self-compassion condition,  $M = 3.93, SD = 0.85; t(187) = 2.37, p = .019$ , and the leader challenges condition,  $M = 3.92, SD = 0.78; t(190) = 2.62, p = .010$ . None of the other conditions were significantly different from each other on leader identity. Figure 3 depicts these effects.

We believe that the distinction between the challenges condition (“think about your challenges in your leader role”) and the leader role self-compassion condition (“think about your challenges in your leader role with self-compassion”) is important to consider theoretically and to test empirically. Both conditions ask leaders to think about the challenges of their leader role, but only the leader role self-compassion condition asks them to do so in a

**Figure 2**  
*Study 1—The Cross-Level Moderation Effect of Structural Power*



**Table 4**  
*Study 1—Results of Conditional Indirect Effects From Multilevel Path Analysis*

Indirect effect	Structural power	Estimate	95% CI
Leader role self-compassion → Task-related helping (via leader identity)	Low	.044*	[.0103, .1039]
	High	.005	[−.0154, .0270]
Leader role self-compassion → Personal helping (via leader identity)	Low	.059*	[.0148, .1245]
	High	.007	[−.0206, .0335]
Leader role self-compassion → Competence (via leader identity and task-related helping)	Low	.000	[−.0051, .0027]
	High	.000	[−.0014, .0005]
Leader role self-compassion → Competence (via leader identity and personal helping)	Low	.005*	[.0004, .0151]
	High	.001	[−.0013, .0039]
Leader role self-compassion → Civility (via leader identity and task-related helping)	Low	−.001	[−.0056, .0011]
	High	.000	[−.0016, .0003]
Leader role self-compassion → Civility (via leader identity and personal helping)	Low	.005*	[.0007, .0153]
	High	.001	[−.0015, .0038]

*Note.* Bias-corrected conditional indirect effect confidence intervals are based on 20,000 Monte Carlo bootstrap samples in *R*. CI = confidence interval. All indirect effects were calculated simultaneously, accounting for direct effects.

\*  $p < .05$ .

self-compassionate way. Our results in Study 2 show that only the latter results in an increase in leader identity, which reinforces our theoretical expectation that being self-compassionate enables leaders to feel more comfortable claiming leader identity because it normalizes challenges in the leader role.

### General Discussion

Integrating research on self-compassion with leader identity theory, we investigated the impact of leader role self-compassion on leader helping and stakeholder evaluations of leader competence and civility and the mediating role of leader identity in driving these outcomes. Our findings showed that on days when leaders engaged in the leader role self-compassion intervention, they helped coworkers more with both task-related and personal issues because they identified more closely with their leader role. Furthermore, we found that stakeholders rated leaders who helped with personal problems as both more competent and more civil. Surprisingly,

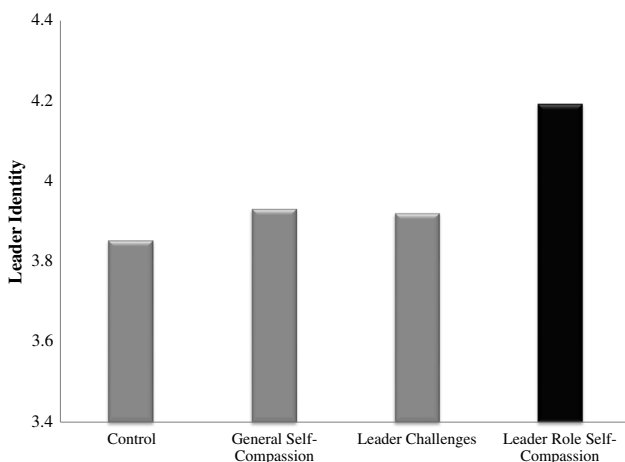
leader task-related helping was not associated with stakeholder ratings of leader competence or leader civility. This could be because, compared to personal helping, task-related helping may be expected of leaders and may not stand out as much to stakeholders on a day-to-day basis. Our research question investigated whether the effect of leader role self-compassion depended on leaders' structural power, and we found that the effect of the intervention on leader identity was stronger for leaders with lower (vs. higher) structural power. Finally, our second study replicated the effect of the leader role self-compassion intervention on leader identity and showed that our intervention had stronger effects on leader identity than a general self-compassion intervention (without challenges) or a leader challenges intervention (without self-compassion), establishing discriminant validity. Our work offers a number of theoretical and practical implications.

### Theoretical Implications

First, acknowledging that leader identity can fluctuate daily even for those holding positions of structural authority in organizations (Lanaj et al., 2021) and recognizing that leader identity influences the amount of leadership displayed (Day & Sin, 2011), we introduce leader role self-compassion as a way to enhance the salience of leader identity on a day-to-day basis. We show that reflecting on one's leadership struggles, but with a mindset of self-compassion, improves leader helping and subsequent effectiveness (as captured by stakeholder ratings of competence and civility) because leaders identify more strongly with their leader role. Our findings suggest that leader effectiveness may benefit from leader role self-compassion because it helps leaders see role stresses and challenges as a normal part of the leadership journey.

Second, we contribute to research on leadership development. Although some have recently acknowledged that leadership is risky and hard work (Zhang, Nahrgang, et al., 2020), little is known about interventions that may help leaders be more effective at work even though those risks exist. Recently, Walton and Wilson (2018) highlighted the need for "wise interventions"—those that motivate people to make sense of themselves in a specific context leading to impactful personal change. We respond to this call by relying on self-compassion research to develop a

**Figure 3**  
*Study 2—The Effects of Leader Role Self-Compassion on Leader Identity Compared to Other Interventions*



leader role self-compassion intervention that has relevance and meaning for those holding formal positions of leadership in organizations. We posit that adopting a leader role self-compassionate mindset through expressive self-reflection (e.g., King, 2001; Pennebaker, 1997) may impact how leaders view themselves and their responsibilities at work day-to-day in ways that make them more effective.

Third, we contribute to research on self-compassion at work. Work represents a stressor for most employees, but especially for leaders who tend to have more responsibilities and a greater relational load than front-line employees (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2017; Pfeffer, 2018). Compassion may combat work stress, and organizational scholars have recently started examining compassionate practices at work (Dutton et al., 2014). We extend this line of work in meaningful ways by suggesting that leader role self-compassion may be a helpful compassionate practice. As we show in this study, leaders who engage in leader role self-compassion tend to also be more compassionate to others in their unit by helping with task-related and personal issues. Ultimately, this pays off for leaders because those who help are rated as more competent and civil by their stakeholders.

### Practical Implications

Our work has several practical implications. First, by developing the leader role self-compassion intervention, we provide a practical low-cost tool for organizations interested in helping their leaders to be more effective at work. Given its role in enhancing leader identity, leader role self-compassion may be a useful tool for leaders aspiring to be more successful or to move up in the organizational structure, as it pushes them to identify more strongly with their leader role and to enact more positive leadership behaviors on a day-to-day basis. Although we found robust effects linking leader role self-compassion to leader identity, leader role self-compassion is not the only way to activate leader identity. For example, research suggests a role for genetics, early socialization, and schooling as influences on leader identity (e.g., Guillén et al., 2015). Compared to these other processes, however, leader role self-compassion is attractive in that it has a much more proximal influence on leader identity, is something that a leader can easily practice, and provides immediate, day-to-day effects. Thus, as a daily practice, leader role self-compassion may be a low-cost practical tool with benefits for daily leader behaviors and, potentially, for longer term leadership development.

Second, our findings suggest that leaders with lower structural power may especially benefit from leader role self-compassion. Leader role self-compassion may benefit novice leaders the most, possibly because they struggle more with their leadership responsibilities as they navigate the politics of daily life at work with less experience and skills than those higher up in the organization (e.g., Anicich & Hirsh, 2017b). To bolster leader identity and to promote more leadership acts in these novice leaders, therefore, organizations could implement leader role self-compassion practices as part of a leadership training program focused on helping novice leaders better acclimate to their leader role. Senior leaders could also reinforce self-compassion through questions they ask these novice leaders and the stance that they show toward themselves and others during challenges.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its several strengths (two field experiments, measures separated in time, multiple raters), our work has some limitations that might inform future research. With the exception of leader competence and civility, the rest of our variables were rated by leaders, and this raises concerns for common method bias. We mitigated these concerns by separating our measures in time, utilizing different question formats (agreements vs. frequencies) (Podsakoff et al., 2012), and person-mean centering our variables, which removes between-person confounds such as social desirability or response tendencies (Beal, 2015). That said, future research might assess the robustness of our findings by, for example, collecting helping data from colleagues.

Other-sourced data help address concerns of common method bias but have limitations too. For example, we were unable to survey all stakeholders and are uncertain whether our measures of competence and civility wholly capture leaders' effectiveness for that day at work. In daily leadership studies, it is challenging to collect data from all stakeholders because they may be busy and unable to observe and rate the leader consistently throughout the study period, or they may be uninterested in participating in the study altogether. Future work that collects more comprehensive data across stakeholders would be a desirable replication.

Leader identity is conceptualized in positive terms from leaders and their organizations (DeRue et al., 2009), but higher leader identity does not necessarily equate to higher leadership performance, as these two are related but distinct concepts. It is possible that leader identity may even promote dysfunctional behaviors in some circumstances. For example, it may be that leader identity and its associated behaviors could be draining for leaders across days, especially given that helping tends to be resource consuming in some contexts (e.g., Koopman et al., 2016). Similarly, a person may fail at several aspects of leading but may still identify with the leader role for other reasons (e.g., being power hungry). We invite future research to investigate the potential drawbacks of leader identity.

Although we expected positive consequences for leader role self-compassion at work, self-compassion could potentially induce complacency, as people may let themselves off the hook and not learn from their past mistakes and failures. While empirical research in psychology has not documented complacency effects for self-compassion (e.g., Barnard & Curry, 2011; Germer & Neff, 2019; Neff, 2015), it is possible that in a leadership context, leader role self-compassion could become maladaptive over time, manifesting in entitlement or laissez-faire leadership. Future research could explore these interesting ideas.

Unfortunately, we are unable to look at next-day or compound effects for leader role self-compassion in a reliable manner due to random assignment. On the one hand, it is possible that the intervention may have effects that build up. For example, leader identity-induced positive behaviors could help sustain a positive leader identity over time in the manner of positive spirals described in the leadership research (e.g., Day et al., 2009; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). On the other hand, people may adapt to the intervention, thus reducing its effectiveness over time. We hope that future research will examine the effects that leader role self-compassion may have on leaders over time by utilizing different research designs.



In this study, we investigate the extent to which leader role self-compassion activates leader identity. However, it is possible that leader role self-compassion may actually change the meaning of what it means to be a leader, especially as leaders encounter various experiences throughout their lives (e.g., Hammond et al., 2017) or practice self-compassion over time. It is also possible that leaders who take a self-compassionate perspective of their role on a regular basis may have relatively steady levels of leader identity and may be less susceptible to self-compassion inductions. We hope that future research will expand on our findings to look at longer-term effects of the intervention.

When discussing the moderating role of structural power, we assume that higher structural power indicates more leadership experience because managerial experience is associated with higher odds of being promoted to middle and senior managerial positions (Claussen et al., 2014). We empirically considered this assumption by examining the correlation between structural power and a demographic data question in our recruitment survey in Study 1: “How many years have you been in a supervisory/managerial position?” The correlation between structural power and this question assessing past managerial experience was  $r = .31$  ( $p = .011$ ), supporting our assumption. That said, an employee may be promoted to positions higher in the organizational hierarchy for reasons other than managerial experience, such as nepotism or technical prowess. Thus, it would be interesting to examine whether structural power gained due to these alternative routes has differing moderating effects on leader identity.

Our study shares a focus on finding practical interventions that make leaders more effective in their roles day-to-day with Lanaj et al. (2019). Despite this commonality, there are several key differences between the two studies. First, Lanaj et al. (2019) suggest that reflecting on one’s positive qualities may energize leaders for their challenging jobs. In contrast, we suggest that it is beneficial for leaders to actually think about challenges they experience in their leader role, but only if they do so in a self-compassionate manner. Indeed, taking a self-compassionate perspective may be helpful for leaders who may otherwise struggle to think of times when they had positive experiences in their leader role or to think of positive qualities that render them successful in their roles. Furthermore, whereas Lanaj et al. (2019) argued that their intervention may affect leader energy levels via either generating new personal resources or by activating leader identity, they did not measure these mechanisms. In contrast, we directly assess leader identity in both studies. Together, our work suggests benefits from interventions that capture leaders’ experiences in their leader role, whether it is a focus on positive experiences and characteristics (Lanaj et al., 2019) or a focus on challenges and hardships, as we assess here.

Finally, future research might wish to examine various spillover effects of leader role self-compassion. For example, it may be that stakeholders who interact with leaders who practice self-compassion regularly and perhaps visibly in their workgroup may themselves become more self-compassionate at work or in other roles, such as that of a parent or of a partner at home. Self-compassionate leaders who come to see that struggles are a normal occurrence at work may also be motivated to be more tender and forgiving with loved ones in the home environment. We hope that research investigating work-life spillover will explore these interesting possibilities.

## Conclusion

Drawing from research on self-compassion and leader identity theory, we investigate how leader role self-compassion—a mindset where leaders view their leader role and its challenges with acceptance and kindness—influences leader behaviors and perceptions day-to-day via leader identity. We show that leader role self-compassion positively influences how leaders act at work and how they are then evaluated by their stakeholders because it fosters a stronger connection to their leader role. We are hopeful that these findings will inspire more research on leader role self-compassion and its effects on leaders and others.

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## Appendix

### Interventions

#### Leader Role Self-Compassion (Studies 1 and 2)

Version 1: Please recall a time in which you were understanding and patient toward yourself when experiencing challenges at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 2: Please recall a time in which you were kind and compassionate to yourself when experiencing hardships at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 3: Please recall a time in which you gave yourself the caring and tenderness you needed when going through a very hard time at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 4: Please recall a time in which you were tolerant and forgiving of your own flaws and inadequacies at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 5: Please recall a time in which you were understanding and accepting toward yourself when feeling emotional distress at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

#### Controls (Studies 1 and 2)

Version 1: Please recall what you had for dinner last night. In 2–5 sentences, describe your meal—what you had, where you ate it, how you felt, etc.

Version 2: Please recall the last time you went to see a movie at the movie theater. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the event—what movie you watched, with whom, what you thought about it, etc.

Version 3: Please recall your commute to work on a day last week. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the experience—traffic, how long it took, how you felt about it, etc.

Version 4: Please recall the last activity you did before you went to sleep last night. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the activity—what you did, how you felt, etc.

Version 5: Please recall the most recent purchase that you made. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the purchase—what you got, what you thought about it, etc.

#### General Self-Compassion (Study 2 Only)

Version 1: Please recall a time in which you were understanding and patient toward yourself when experiencing challenges. In 2–5

sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 2: Please recall a time in which you were kind and compassionate to yourself when experiencing hardships. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 3: Please recall a time in which you gave yourself the caring and tenderness you needed when going through a very hard time. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 4: Please recall a time in which you were tolerant and forgiving of your own flaws and inadequacies. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 5: Please recall a time in which you were understanding and accepting toward yourself when feeling emotional distress. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

#### Leader Challenges (Study 2 Only)

Version 1: Please recall a time in which you experienced challenges at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 2: Please recall a time in which you experienced hardships at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 3: Please recall a time in which you were going through a very hard time at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 4: Please recall a time in which you encountered your own flaws and inadequacies at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

Version 5: Please recall a time in which you were feeling emotional distress at work because of your role as a leader. In 2–5 sentences, please describe the situation—what happened, how you felt, etc.

## Measures

### Leader Identity (Lanaj et al., 2021)

1. Right now, I believe I have the characteristics of a leader.
2. Right now, I see myself as a leader.

(Appendix continues)

3. Right now, being a leader is very important to my sense of who I am.
4. Right now, it is important to my sense of self that others see me as a leader.

### **Task-Related Helping (Lanaj et al., 2016)**

1. Today at work, I helped one or more coworkers who asked for my help with difficult assignments.
2. Today at work, I helped one or more coworkers who asked for my help with heavy work loads.
3. Today at work, I went out of my way to help one or more coworkers who asked for my help with work-related problems.

### **Personal Helping (Lanaj & Jennings, 2020)**

1. Today at work, I helped one or more coworkers who asked for my help by listening when they had to get something off their chest.
2. Today at work, I helped one or more coworkers who asked for my help with their personal problems and worries.
3. Today at work, I helped one or more coworkers who asked for my help by taking an interest in their personal problems.

### **Leader Competence (Adapted From Fiske et al., 2002)**

1. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> showed competence.
2. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> showed confidence.
3. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> showed efficiency.
4. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> showed intelligence.
5. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> showed skill.

6. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> showed capability.

### **Leader Civility (Adapted From Porath et al., 2015)**

1. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> treated me with respect.
2. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> treated me with dignity.
3. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> treated me politely.
4. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> was pleasant to me.
5. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> treated me in a caring manner.
6. Today at work, <<Leader's Name>> was considerate.

### **Structural Power (Fouk et al., 2019)**

1. How much discretion do you have over salary or bonus allocation for staff in your organization?
2. How much authority do you have over the hiring and firing of staff in your organization?
3. How much influence do you have over decisions that affect others in the organization?
4. How much power do you have in your organization?

### **Positive Affect (Control Variable; Watson et al., 1988)**

Inspired, Alert, Excited, Enthusiastic, Determined

### **Negative Affect (Control Variable; Watson et al., 1988)**

Afraid, Upset, Nervous, Scared, Distressed

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