

Article

Coping with Supervisor Sanctions During Organizational Change: Core Members' Active Change Behavior and Followers' Middle Way Thinking

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Abstract: Recent research has shown that an organizational change implementation tactic is vital for influencing employee reactions to change. Hard tactics, such as supervisor sanction, are generally verified as obstructive to employees' positive change behavior. The aim of this study is to identify the contingency circumstances under which sanction would be less harmful or even effective to change. By identifying the organizational situational influence of core members' active change behavior and followers' individual differences of middle way thinking, this study constructed a model that offers insight into the effectiveness of supervisor sanctions during change. Data from 250 employees in China were gathered by questionnaires. Results from hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) revealed that core members' behavior neutralized the negative effect of supervisor sanctions on followers' active change behavior. Moreover, this moderating effect was further magnified by followers' personal middle way thinking value. The conclusions emphasized the roles of core members' supportive behavior to change, which acts as role model, and of the individual middle way thinking values that have sustained Eastern Asia for thousands of years in successfully implementing change. The findings provide insights for the successful implementation tactics in organization change and enrich the understanding of the organizational change process. Research should continue to treat followers' change reactions as a synergy output of situational factors and individual characteristics and examine the variables of these dimensions in the work environment.

Keywords: sanctions; active change behavior; core members; social influence; middle way thinking; Eastern Asia

1. Introduction

According to Kiefer, "ongoing organizational change has become an increasingly common context for contemporary work" [1]. Both researchers and practitioners generally view employee acceptance and support for organizational change as a critical condition for its success [2,3]. As part of efforts to better understand employees reactions to organizational change, scholars have explored the effects of the nature of change—that is, the content or "what" of change (e.g., easy-to-use manners)—and the process of implementing change: that is, the "how" of change implementation [3–8]. Massive research has been applied to verify the effectiveness of managerial influence tactics on change implementation [5,9–11], but consensus on this topic has been elusive. Hard influence tactics, such as sanctions, which usually involve the use of power and authority, are consistently validated to negatively predict organizational outcomes [12–17]. However, researchers have noticed that sanctions and authoritative managerial styles sustain popularity in Eastern management scenarios [18]. This disconnect between the conceptual

counter-productiveness and the actual popularity of sanctions indicates that the effectiveness of these management tactics may exist with a situational contingency that has not been well explored. To further explore this paradox, scholars have gone beyond the nature and process of change and increasingly emphasized individual differences [3], colleagues' interactions [19–21], and the cultural contexts [22,23].

In Eastern Asia, supervisor sanction remains the most common managerial influence tactic to reduce employees' resistance to organizational change, partly because of the popularity of authoritarian leadership in this region [5,24,25]. The present study sought to address the question of why hard tactics, such as sanctions, persist, especially in organizational change context. Unlike previous research on influence tactics, which has mostly focused on the mediating mechanism to reveal the function of influence tactics in change—especially the soft ones [5,13]—this work concentrates on the application contingency of hard tactics that have not been well investigated. Without more solid evidence of these moderating factors, it would be premature to conclude that hard tactics are generally counterproductive to organization. The function of sanctions may be magnified by social influence from other members in workplaces in Eastern Asia (e.g., China, Korea, and Taiwan), where people are more inclined to be influenced by their surroundings due to traditional Eastern culture [26]. We introduce an Eastern Asia emic value, middle way thinking (the doctrine of the mean), as another critical factor interacting with social influence to shape employees' response to change. Middle way thinking, a core value of Confucianism, prescribes principles by which a person manages his or her relationships with their surroundings [27,28] based on the fundamental principles of holism, change, and contradiction [29]. A person following middle way thinking maintains congruence of his or her actions with their surroundings when the actions do not affect others and employs a moderate rather than excessive strategy when the actions can impede others [30].

Eastern Asia is an emerging area undergoing tremendous social change, and organizations in this region have consequently experienced continuous change [31]. Employees' active change behavior, a kind of positive and proactive response to organizational change, is beneficial for the successful implementation of organizational change [32]. Therefore, efforts to ascertain the conditions under which hard influence tactics may shift from negative to positive for change outcomes are of great importance. The present study investigates the active change behavior of core members as a form of social influence that interacts with middle way thinking to modify the effectiveness of sanctions in promoting followers' active change behavior in the implementation of organizational change. Our theoretical propositions are empirically validated by multisource data collected from 262 employees of 43 work teams in China. This study offers a valuable contribution to the influence tactics literature by identifying when hard tactics will become effective in promoting change behaviors, and provides specific management suggestions to the change agents.

2. Theoretical and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Supervisor Sanctions and Followers' Active Change Behavior

Compared with soft tactics, such as ingratiation and consultation, sanctions are a hard managerial influence tactic in which managers threaten to punish employees for noncompliance through reprimands or withholding desired rewards [5]. Because of the popularity of authoritarian leadership and top-down processes of organizational change, sanctions are one of the main managerial strategies adopted during the implementation of organizational change [24]. Followers subject to sanctions are likely to feel controlled or to experience a loss of autonomy, resulting in reduced intrinsic motivation to participate in organizational change [33]. Followers are also likely to assume that the coercive supervisor mistrusts and dislikes them and to perceive that their supervisor abuses his or her authority like a "tyrant" [34]. Such perceptions could erode followers' support for their supervisor and motivate them to retaliate by exerting only minimum effort and withholding proactive contributions. Therefore, when faced with the potential punishment of sanctions, followers tend to choose a safe strategy, such as compliance, rather than proactively participating in organizational change. Falbe and Yuke indeed found that

pressure is more likely to result in resistance or compliance than commitment [35]. Furst and Cable also demonstrated that supervisor sanctions actually have no effect on employee involvement in change and, even worse, enhance employee resistance to change when leader–member exchange is low [5]. Therefore, we hypothesize that sanctions, as a common hard tactic, will undermine follower active change behavior.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Supervisor sanctions are negatively related to follower active change behavior.*

2.2. Social Influence of Core Members' Active Change Behavior

Based on the social information processing theory, Salancik and Pfeffer [36] demonstrated that certain individuals, such as coworkers in the workplace, play distinct roles in influencing other employees' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors by providing salient, credible, and relevant social information about an object or situation. In this study, social influence from coworkers is specifically defined as team members' shared perception of intra-team core members' active change behavior during change [37]. The value of core employees is reflected not only in their contribution to organizational core competitiveness [38], but also in their role as examples and leaders to other employees. The actions of core employees are an important reference for their colleagues, especially in the turbulent period of organizational change, and the influence of core employees is expected to modify the effect of supervisor sanctions on employees' change behavior. If the core members of a team display an acceptable attitude and behavior in response to change, other team members are likely to perceive a higher possibility of supervisor sanctions. The behavior of core employees, who are closer to the center of power or have higher intragroup status, provides a signal to others that if even these high-status members are forced to change, then non-cooperation is more likely to be unreasonable and high-risk. To some extent, cooperative responses from core members represent an endorsement of organizational change implementation and, thus, supervisor implemental tactics. The cooperation of core members in change may lead the focal member to realize that the change is important for his or her organization and conclude that the use of coercion is necessary [5]. Therefore, core members' supportive reactions justify or legalize supervisor sanction, and the negative perceptions and responses of focal followers to supervisor sanction will decrease.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The active change behavior of core members will moderate the relationship between supervisor sanctions and followers' active change behavior such that supervisor sanction is less negatively related to followers' active change behavior when the active change behavior of core members is high than when it is low.*

2.3. Moderating Emic Value of Middle Way Thinking

Middle way thinking, or Zhongyong, is a main cultural value of Confucianism that has dominated Chinese thinking for thousands of years. Originally proposed by Zisi (the grandson of Confucius), middle way thinking advocates that people should be congruent with their surroundings to achieve harmonious nature–human integration. Action should be guided by a congruence strategy if no conflict exists or by a moderate and compromised rather than excessive strategy if the actions impede others [27,28,39]. The congruence and moderate strategies enable people to maintain traditional propriety (e.g., mianzi or face) and holistic harmony with their surroundings reduce barriers to achieving goals, and protect themselves from possible punishment when they advance or retreat [26].

As a critical emic value in China, middle way thinking is vitally distinct from etic values, such as collectivism and power distance. Collectivism values collective interests over individual interests, and power distance defines the unequal distribution of power in a hierarchical social system [40]. In contrast to unidirectional power distance and collectivism, middle way thinking advocates a holistic and divergent interpretation of ones' surroundings to achieve harmonious nature–human integration, thus emphasizing flexibility and adaptability to various social situations using the congruence and moderate strategies [28,30]. Indeed, rather than engaging in excessive tactics, Chinese followers are

more likely to wait and observe the situation (holistically reviewing) before taking action, in line with the doctrine of the means to maintain Chinese traditional propriety (e.g., mianzi; giving face) and eliminate potential interpersonal conflicts rather than engage in excessive tactics. For example, Yukl, Fu, and McDonald [9] found that middle- and lower-level Chinese managers prefer to adopt a middle tactic in influencing their supervisors: that is, in addition to remaining relevant and formally presenting their voice. They highly value informal and indirect tactics (e.g., informal explanation) to avoid potential interpersonal conflicts and embarrassment if rejection occurs, whereas Western managers rate direct and task-oriented tactics (e.g., rational persuasion) as more effective.

We propose that middle way thinking strengthens the social influence of core members' active change behavior to further moderate the relationship between supervisor sanctions and employees' active change behavior. Middle way thinking advocates that a member should sensitively observe coworkers' behavior, perceive their intentions, and further discreetly adjust and regulate himself or herself to be compatible with the values and behavior of the group members [28]. Because of the perception of susceptibility to sanction, a focal follower with a high level of middle way thinking will tend to evaluate the risk of supervisor sanctions based on core members' active change behavior. For instance, the focal follower may conclude that sanctions will occur if he or she becomes a unique member and is not consistent with core members' active change behavior. The only way to avoid sanctions is to maintain internal and interpersonal harmony by actively participating in organizational change like the core members [30]. By contrast, a focal member with a low level of middle way thinking will be less likely to care about the behavior of others and to consider the possibility of sanctions, resulting in an inconsistent response to organizational change. Therefore, the social influence of core members becomes weak when the middle way thinking of the focal member is low.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *The moderating effect of core members' active change behavior on the relationship between supervisor sanctions and the focal follower's active change behavior is further moderated by the focal member's middle way thinking such that the moderating effect of core members' active change behavior is stronger when the focal follower's middle way thinking is high than when it is low.*

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Sample and Procedures

The present data were collected from a consumer product industry located in Central China. Before the survey, we interviewed employees and executives of companies in this industry to confirm that they had been implementing a series of changes. With approval and support from their executives, initial data were collected from 262 employees and their supervisors (93% response rate). We excluded employee data with missing supervisor ratings and employees with less than one year of company tenure to ensure reliable responses based on sufficient organizational experience. This screening procedure resulted in a final analysis sample of 250 employees of 38 work teams. The size of the teams in our final sample ranged from 3 to 15 members, with a mean of 6.58 (SD = 2.75). This sample consisted of 46% males, with an average age and organizational tenure of 30.4 years and 7.3 years, respectively. The education level of the participants was diverse: high school graduate (14%), two years of college (35%), bachelor's degree (48%), and master's degree (3%).

3.2. Measures

Supervisor sanctions, core members' active change behavior, and middle way thinking were reported by followers, and followers' active change behavior was evaluated by supervisors. All items were assessed on five-point Likert-type scales (1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree").

Supervisor sanctions: we adopted the three-item scale of Furst and Cable [5] to measure supervisor sanctions. Based on the interviews with employees conducted before the survey, we slightly revised the three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.81$): (a) "in organizational changes, my supervisor will punish me if I fail to

follow him or her,” (b) “in organizational changes, I will have some troubles from my supervisor if I do not support the changes,” and (c) “my supervisor will verbally reprimand me after some time if I fail to follow him or her in organizational changes.” Although supervisor sanctions were the individual-level predictor, it was aggregated and included in the group-level analysis as a control variable for testing the cross-level moderation of core members’ social influence. Thus, we calculated the aggregation index for supervisor sanctions, including the group-level reliability ($\alpha = 0.78$), within-team agreement ($r_{wg} = 0.80$), and intraclass correlations ($ICC(1) = 0.13$ and $ICC(2) = 0.53$). The F-statistic presented significant mean differences among groups ($F = 1.90, p < 0.01$). Overall, these statistics justified the aggregation of team members’ ratings of supervisor sanctions [41].

Core members’ active change behavior: we measured core members’ active change behavior using three items ($\alpha = 0.90$) taken from Herscovitch and Meyer [42]. The items included (a) “core members in our department/team actively accept organizational changes,” (b) “core members in our department/team actively accept changes in rules and requirements,” and (c) “core members in our department/team actively participate in organizational changes.” In the present study, core members’ active change behavior was constructed as a group-level construct. To justify the validity of the group-level aggregation of member ratings, we checked group-level reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$), within-team agreement ($r_{wg} = 0.85$), and intraclass correlations ($ICC(1) = 0.17$ and $ICC(2) = 0.57$). The F-statistic presented significant mean differences among groups ($F = 1.89, p < 0.01$). These statistics justified the aggregation of member ratings to create the group-level measure of core members’ active change behavior [41].

Middle way thinking: we utilized six items from Du and coauthors [26] to assess followers’ middle way thinking ($\alpha = 0.77$): (a) “actions should be proper and moderate rather than rash and extreme,” (b) “taking action should not only be fair and rational but also with consideration for the emotions of and propriety toward other people,” (c) “taking action should be made with consideration of holistic harmony,” (d) “to be harmoniously congruent with surroundings, I should refer to others’ thoughts and values,” (e) “I think though all possibilities and take action properly when I deal with work related to interpersonal issues,” and (f) “I find a balance or compromise point among various opinions.” Because middle way thinking needed to be aggregated and included in the group-level analysis as a control variable for testing the cross-level moderation of core members’ social influence, we checked group-level reliability ($\alpha = 0.75$), within-team agreement ($r_{wg} = 0.92$), and intra-class correlations ($ICC(1) = 0.12$ and $ICC(2) = 0.50$). The F-statistic presented significant mean differences among groups ($F = 1.90, p < 0.01$).

Followers’ active change behavior: we measured followers’ active change behavior using the same three items ($\alpha = 0.93$) as coworkers’ active change behavior. The items included (a) “this follower actively accepts organizational changes,” (b) “this follower actively accepts changes in rules and requirements,” and (c) “this follower actively participates in organizational changes.”

3.3. Control Variables

To control for the potential effects of demographic factors on follower’s active change behavior, we included age, gender, education, and organizational tenure in our analysis: age in years, gender (female = 0, male = 1), tenure with the company in years, and education (high school = 1, two-year college = 2, bachelor’s degree = 3, master’s degree = 4). We also controlled for organizational membership by including a company dummy (A company = 0, B company = 1).

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model Analysis

To examine the empirical distinctiveness of the study variables, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test how well the specified factor models explained the observed pattern of sample correlations or covariance, which helped to examine the relationships of the observed

measures to their posited underlying constructs. The CFA results showed that the three-factor model for variables reported by followers produced a significantly better model fit (χ^2 (df = 49) = 132.69, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.058) compared to the two-factor model (combining core members' active change behavior and middle way thinking, χ^2 (df = 51) = 240.22, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.122) and the one-factor model (χ^2 (df = 52) = 685.23, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.51, RMSEA = 0.221). The means, standard deviations, and inter-scale correlations for all study variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-scale Correlations: Individual-level Data.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	30.49	6.11								
2. Gender	1.46	0.50	−0.03							
3. Organizational tenure	7.34	6.83	0.77	−0.08						
4. Education level	4.31	0.97	−0.18	0.05	−0.27					
5. Supervisor sanctions	2.92	0.86	0.04	0.04	0.08	0.35				
6. Core members' active change behavior	3.69	0.66	0.10	0.06	0.09	−0.10	−0.06			
7. Middle way thinking	3.97	0.39	0.10	0.01	0.09	0.08	0.15	0.27		
8. Follower active change behavior	3.84	0.64	0.00	−0.08	0.08	0.07	−0.19	−0.01	−0.05	

Note: $r > 0.14$, $p < 0.05$; $r < -0.17$, $p < 0.01$; $r > 0.20$ and $r < -0.20$, $p < 0.001$.

4.2. Results of Hypothesis Testing

We conducted a multilevel analytic approach of hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) for hypothesis testing. Multilevel modeling in HLM enabled us to simultaneously test relationships within a certain level and between or across hierarchical levels, allowing us to disentangle the effects of between- and within-group variance on the dependent variable [43]. Taking into account the nested structure of the current data with 250 employees of 38 work teams, we utilized this analytic approach of hierarchical linear modeling to consider the shared variance among employees from the same team, as well as the non-independence of employee ratings offered by the team leader synchronously [43]. As noted by Hofmann and Gavin, a cross-level interaction without controlling for the corresponding group-level interaction will represent both cross-level and group-level interactions, thus leading to confounding results [44]. Zhang, Zyphur, and Preacher [45] also pointed out that the confounding of individual-level variance with group-level variance could generate erroneous analysis results. We therefore tested our hypotheses involving individual-level and cross-level moderation effects by controlling for the corresponding interaction terms at the group level [41].

We hypothesized a negative effect of supervisor sanctions on the active change behavior of followers. As reported in Model 1 in Table 2, after controlling for age, gender, education, and organizational tenure, the effects of supervisor sanction on the active change behavior of followers was significant ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that core members' active change behavior attenuates the negative effect of supervisor sanctions on followers' active change behavior. This hypothesis was tested in Model 2, which included core members' active change behavior, aggregated supervisor sanction, and the interaction term of the two constructs in addition to the group-level equations to control for the confounding effects of individual- and group-level interactions, as shown in Table 2 [45]. The results showed that the cross-level interaction between core members' active change behavior and supervisor sanctions was significantly related to followers' active change behavior ($\gamma = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$). We plotted the significant interaction following a simple slope analysis [46]. Plot A in Figure 1 shows that the relationship between supervisor sanctions and the focal follower's active change behavior was negative

when core members’ active change behavior was low ($b = -0.18, p < 0.05$) and neutral when core members’ active change behavior was high ($b = 0.04, ns$). This pattern confirmed Hypothesis 2.

Table 2. Hierarchical Linear Models.

	Null Model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Individual-level predictor</i>					
Age		0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
Gender		-0.04	-0.01	-0.03	-0.03
Tenure		0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Education		0.08	0.10 *	0.08	0.08
Sanction		-0.14 **	-0.15 **	-0.13 **	-0.14 **
Middle way thinking				-0.06	-0.07
Middle way thinking × Sanction				-0.13	-0.13
<i>Group-level predictor</i>					
Size			-0.01		-0.02
CMACB			0.14		0.15
Aggregated Sanction			-0.26		-0.40 *
Aggregated middle way thinking					0.41
CMACB × Aggregated Sanction			0.25		0.43
CMACB × Aggregated middle way thinking					-1.69
Aggregated Sanction × Aggregated middle way thinking					1.36
CMACB × Aggregated Sanction × Aggregated Middle way thinking					2.32
<i>Cross-level predictor</i>					
CMACB (× Sanction)			0.38*		0.33 *
CMACB (× Middle way thinking)					0.70
CMACB (× Sanction × Middle way thinking)					0.99 **
Sigma_squared	0.28874	0.27975	0.27322	0.24363	0.25913
Tau	0.11000	0.11412	0.11401	0.21831	0.08962
Pseudo R ²					

Note: CMACB = Core members’ active change behavior; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

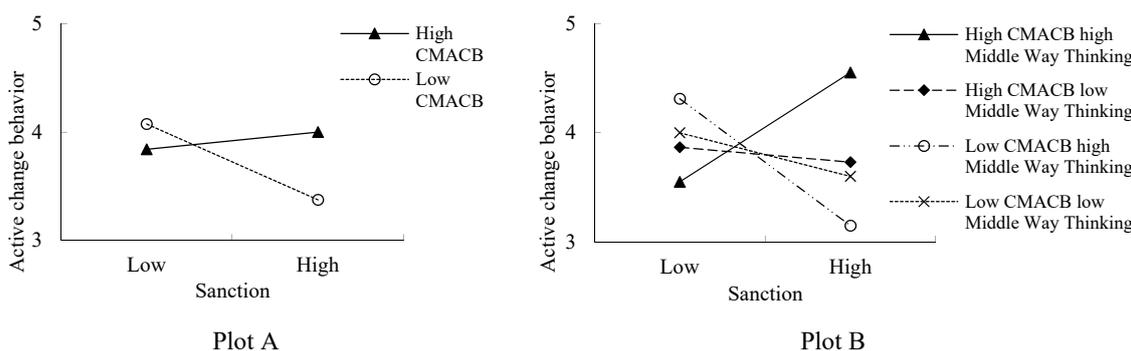


Figure 1. Interactions of Supervisor Sanctions with CMACB and Middle Way Thinking. Note: CMACB = Core members’ active change behavior.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that middle way thinking enhances the moderating effect of core members’ active change behavior on the relationship between supervisor sanctions and followers’ active change behavior. To control the confounding effect of individual- and group-level interactions, we added aggregated middle way thinking, aggregated sanctions, core members’ active change behavior, and their interaction terms in Model 4, as shown in Table 2. The results showed that middle way thinking magnified the positive moderating effect of core members’ active change behavior ($\gamma = 0.99, p < 0.01$).

We graphed this significant interaction (see Plot B in Figure 1) and found that supervisor sanctions had a positive effect on the focal follower's active change behavior when both core members' active change behavior and middle way thinking of the focal follower were high ($b = 0.25, p < 0.01$). By contrast, when core members' active change behavior was low and middle way thinking of the focal follower was high, the main effect was negative ($b = -0.29, p < 0.05$). When middle way thinking of the focal follower was low, the relationship between supervisor sanction and the focal follower's active change behavior was slightly negative regardless of whether core members' active change behavior was high or low ($b = -0.03, ns$ and $b = -0.10, ns$, respectively). These results demonstrated that followers high in middle way thinking were more susceptible to the social influence of core members' active change behavior, confirming Hypothesis 3.

5. Discussion

Accumulating studies have highlighted the potential of the context of change, compared with the nature of change and the process of implementing change, to explain more of the variance of employee change behavior [5,31]. Using supervisor sanctions as a change implementation strategy, the present study isolated and tested its theoretically meaningful boundary conditions in emerging markets, using China as a case, while specifically focusing on the effects of core members' social influence at the group level and followers' middle way thinking at the individual level. Results of the HLM analysis using 250 employees from 38 work teams indicated that the effectiveness of supervisor sanctions depends on coworkers' social influence and followers' cultural values. We discuss the implications of our findings for theory and practice below.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Supervisor sanctions are a major organizational change strategy in emerging markets due, in part, to the popularity of traditional authoritarian leadership in these countries [25,47–49]. Supervisor sanctions can yield employee compliance because employees recognize the supervisor's power to inflict punishment, such as withholding rewards [50]. Our findings demonstrate the negative effect of supervisor sanctions on followers' active change behavior. Supervisors can successfully force followers' compliance using external stimulation to reduce followers' perceptions of control and autonomy, lower their intrinsic motivation, and, thus, discourage their proactive contributions [51].

Our findings further reveal that the effectiveness of supervisor sanctions is moderated by the social influence of core members, who provide information that is more salient. The active change behavior of core members influences the effects of supervisor sanctions on followers in the implementation of organizational change: that is, the focal follower is more likely to understand the sanctions positively when core members express active change behavior. Furst and Cable found that a high-quality supervisor relationship could reduce the negative explanation of supervisor sanctions, thus, decreasing the association of sanctions with employee resistance to organizational change [5].

The present study further proposed that the less familiar but deep-rooted emic construct of middle way thinking held by Eastern Asian employees would enhance the social influence of core members. As a Chinese traditional cognitive schema, middle way thinking encourages proper action to actively maintain balance between a person and his/her surroundings [26]. Followers with high middle way thinking are expected to be more sensitive to social influence from core members to maintain actions congruent with their surroundings [28]. Our results indeed verified this proposition: followers high in middle way thinking responded much more strongly to the social influence of core members, thus magnifying the moderating effect of core members' active change behavior on the link between supervisor sanctions and followers' active change behavior.

The conclusions of this study shed light on the paradox of sanction strategies. Even though sanctions are known to generate certain negative consequences, supervisors still utilize this form of influence strategy, especially in emerging countries (e.g., China, Korea, and Taiwan) [25,47,52]. Using China as a case, we found that under supervisor sanctions, employees with traditional Eastern values,

such as middle way thinking, are more likely to actively embrace organizational change if they observe the vigorous involvement of core members.

5.2. Practical Implications

The present study highlighted the importance of the social influence of core members' behavioral support to change by revealing its modifying effect on the effectiveness of management strategies, especially in emerging countries. The empirical results particularly emphasized the significance of cultural values rooted in individual perceptions to affect followers' change reactions contingently. In their interactions with core members who demonstrated supportive behaviors toward change under supervisor sanctions, followers' intrinsic middle way thinking values could trigger their adjustment of the original perception of supervisor sanctions.

As inter-organization social cues, core members' behaviors are in a pivotal position to cultivate a supportive change environment. Followers' negative reaction to change is generally triggered by the anticipation that the latent costs of change will outweigh its benefits [53]. In cases where core members set an example by supporting change with action, followers scrutinize the behaviors of authorities: i.e., the core members as possible leads to appropriate attitudes and behaviors when coping with uncertain change environments. In summary, during the change implementation process, getting the support from core members first can be the stepping stone to followers' engagement. Supervisors or change agents are recommended to attach importance to core members by inviting them to participate in the decision-making process. Meanwhile, identifying the core members who are negative to change and feeding back proactively may help to avoid subsequent change obstacles.

It is worth noting that the empirical evidence suggested that core members' role modelling is more influential to some followers than for others. For supervisors who prefer to use hard strategies, they should exercise caution in cultivating middle way thinking among employees because middle way thinking is a double-edged sword: that is, it can have both positive and negative effects simultaneously. Middle way thinking, as a value orientation sustained in the Eastern environment that regulates individuals' perceptions and behaviors imperceptibly, has given proof to the phenomenon of allelopathy with authoritarian leadership, which is also popular in Eastern management scenarios and is usually characterized by punitive tactics [24,25]. This indicates that in global management, traditional cultures possess their own adaptability and should be properly maintained and utilized.

6. Conclusions and Future Study

In conclusion, this study confirms that sanctions harm followers' active change behavior. Meanwhile, the findings also reveal that the social influence of core members who support change can reduce the undermining effects of supervisor sanctions. However, for Eastern Asian individuals, the probability and utility of the effects of social cues hinges on each employee's value orientation of middle way thinking.

This study has certain limitations. First, although the current study explored middle way thinking, an Eastern traditional value, the data only included 250 Chinese employees of 38 work teams, whereas previous research has examined a large number of samples [48]. Therefore, the generalizability of the results is limited due to the increasing diversity in China and other emerging countries [25]. Future research should pursue further validation of the present findings in other East Asian regions with similar values, such as South Korea [54].

Second, our research design highlighted the emic value of middle way thinking but failed to include etic values, such as collectivism. Collectivism could magnify the positive effects and shrink the negative effects of social influence because it emphasizes the collective interest over individual interest. Future research could examine the distinct role of middle way thinking in shaping employee behavior by including collectivism and power distance [55].

Third, the cross-sectional design of the present study precluded us from making definitive causal inferences about and analyzing the temporal dynamics of the proposed relationships. The willingness

of followers to accept sanctions may reinforce the leader's use of this strategy over time. Moreover, employee values attain collective properties over the long term, and members of the same team develop a greater level of homogeneity in their values. Thus, future studies should investigate the potential multi-level dynamic interaction of management influence strategies with emerging collective values in employee outcomes using a longitudinal research design.

Despite these limitations, the present study extends our understanding of the influence of management strategies during the implementation of organizational change by investigating social influence and follower values that shape the influence of strategy effectiveness, especially in Eastern emerging markets. Social influence had a strong moderating effect on the relationship between the sanction strategy and employees' active change behavior, consistent with previous suggestions that the change context might explain more of the variance of employee response [2,31,56]. Unlike unidirectional etic values, middle way thinking magnified the social influence of core members, regardless of whether this influence was positive or negative. This might explain the adaptability of Chinese employees to various social surroundings: that is, traditional middle way thinking encourages them to be congruent with their surroundings [25]. To extend the present study, future research should include additional influential management factors and investigate their interplay with both emic and etic values to shape the employee response to organizational change.

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