


Article

The Effect of Idiosyncratic Deals on Coworkers' Knowledge Hiding: A Moderated Serial Mediation Model

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Abstract: The essence of knowledge management involves the personalized management of talented employees who possess tacit knowledge. Unfortunately, non-standardized practices can lead to negative knowledge behaviors among coworkers, which can hamper beneficial knowledge interactions. This study aims to explore the underlying mechanism of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) on knowledge hiding from the bystander perspective. We conducted a two-wave on-site survey of 321 knowledge-based employees in Kunshan Industrial Park, China. During the first wave, employees provided information regarding their perceptions of others' i-deals and ethical leadership. Two weeks later, employees reported their effort–reward imbalance (ERI), psychological distress, and knowledge hiding behaviors. To test our hypothesis, we used a hierarchical regression analysis with SPSS 26.0 and a path analysis with Mplus 7.4. The results indicate that (a) coworkers' perceptions of other employees' idiosyncratic deals (CPOEID) have an indirect effect on knowledge hiding via ERI and psychological distress; (b) ERI and psychological distress serially mediate the relationship between CPOEID and knowledge hiding; and (c) ethical leadership not only reduces the positive effect of CPOEID on ERI but also weakens the serial mediation effects of ERI and psychological distress between CPOEID and knowledge hiding. Our investigation, by using a cognitive-emotional processing system framework, provides a new theoretical perspective on the potential dysfunctionality of differentiated human resource management practices. Furthermore, our findings offer evidence for the compatibility of leadership and policy factors, as ethical leadership lessens the destructive effects of management practices.

Keywords: idiosyncratic deals; knowledge hiding; effort–reward imbalance; psychological distress; ethical leadership; the bystander perspective



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1. Introduction

In today's knowledge-based economy, enterprises are increasingly recognizing the value of knowledge assets such as capabilities and intangible resources in gaining competitive advantages [1]. As such, knowledge management has become an increasingly important strategy for enterprises to maintain their competitive advantages and ensure sustainable development. Despite its power, however, knowledge is often directly managed ineffectively due to its tacit nature (i.e., personal and embedded nature), which makes it difficult to document and share. Indeed, organizations have come to recognize the invaluable contributions of those employees who possess this tacit knowledge [2], such as special knowledge, skills, and unique characteristics [3]. To optimize knowledge management, organizations have implemented differentiated human resource management policies (HRM) that offer privileged treatment to these talented individuals, such as individualized employment arrangements known as idiosyncratic deals (i-deals). These can include higher salaries, better opportunities for advancement, higher social status, and other resources [4]. This management policy not only fosters individual employee growth

and helps them realize their career goals [5,6], but also encourages them to share their professional knowledge, maximizing their value to the organization. Additionally, it is an effective strategy for the organization to attract and retain talent and to ultimately secure a sustainable competitive advantage [7].

It has been demonstrated that i-deals can motivate i-dealers to actively share knowledge, experience, and information [8]. However, implementing i-deals involves a three-party game between the grantor (managers), the recipient (employees), and the bystander (coworkers), rather than just a binary interaction between the target employee and the manager [9]. The success of an organization in building beneficial knowledge interactions after implementing a talent management policy depends not only on the knowledge sharing behavior of i-dealers, but also on the knowledge hiding behavior of coworkers, which can have a destructive effect on the knowledge cycle. Because i-deal policies challenge the traditional standardized treatment of HRM, they create differences in employment arrangements between employees [10]. Coworkers may feel that the policy is unfair [6] and be biased against others' access to i-deals [11], leading to a lack of understanding or support [12]. This results in the failure of the knowledge cycle. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the dysfunctional impact of talent management policies on knowledge management from a bystander perspective, specifically the role of i-deals in coworkers' knowledge hiding. To this end, two research questions will be addressed: First, do i-deals lead to coworkers' knowledge hiding and, if so, what internal mechanisms are at play? Second, how does a positive leadership style attenuate the effects of i-deals on coworkers' knowledge hiding?

To answer the first question, we describe the negative effects of i-deals based on the cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS) framework [13] and highlight the critical role of coworkers' cognition and emotion in the process. The framework posits that individuals not only activate different cognitive and affective units in the process of evaluating an event, but also activate affective units after the activation of cognitive units [13]. Coworkers' perceptions of other employees' i-deals (CPOEID) refers to their feelings about the extent to which other employees benefit from i-deals [14,15]. This influences how they behave in the workplace. Through making observations and gathering information, coworkers assess the organizational status of recipients, which helps them form their own perception of their own place in the organization [16]. Specifically, those that receive i-deals are seen to have greater status, more opportunities, and more benefits [15]. This makes coworkers feel like they are being treated unfairly and further exacerbates their sense of an effort–reward imbalance (ERI) [17]. Thus, ERI was chosen as the cognitive unit. Concurrently, comparing themselves to i-dealers can prompt coworkers to recognize their own disadvantages [18], which in turn creates uncertainty about their chances of achieving similar agreements in the future and amplifies their psychological distress. Thus, psychological distress was chosen as the affective unit. In conclusion, i-dealers gain an advantage in resource allocation [19], leaving coworkers feeling disadvantaged [18] and perceiving their effort and reward to be inequitable [20,21]. When coworkers try to balance effort and reward, it can lead to unfavorable psychological and emotional responses [22]. Coworkers may not only withhold pertinent information [23] but, in some instances, they may even disregard requests for expertise and experience from i-dealers. As a result, we aim to integrate cognitive and affective progress and examine the serial mediation of ERI and psychological distress. This is conducted to comprehensively explore the effect of CPOEID on knowledge hiding.

In the workplace, employees acquire information from organizational systems and direct leadership [24] and their understanding of HRM policies and leadership styles forms the basis of their cognitive, affective, and behavioral composition. Research has demonstrated that HRM practices and leadership behaviors can mutually influence each other [25,26]. As such, taking both leadership and institutional factors into account can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how organizational situations affect individuals [27]. When existing HRM practices are inadequate, a proactive leadership style can mitigate the adverse effects of management policies on employee responses [27]. To

this end, we sought to explore the role of ethical leadership in weakening the potential dysfunctional consequences of i-deals to answer the second question. Differentiated HRM practices can create perceptions of unfairness among coworkers, while ethical leadership is defined by traits such as integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness [28,29]. An ethical leader cares about their subordinates, values their professional growth, and makes fair decisions based on ethical principles to ensure the long-term development of the organization [30,31]. Ethical leadership provides an unbiased endorsement for the implementation of i-deals, implying that they are a competent organizational investment in employees rather than a result of managerial bias [15,32]. This assists coworkers in positively perceiving others' i-deals, effectively weakening any negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses.

Our study offers two primary contributions to the research field of differentiated HRM policies and their impact on coworkers' knowledge behaviors. First, we investigate the potentially detrimental outcomes of i-deals from the bystander perspective, thereby deepening our understanding of the impact of HRM practices on knowledge interactions. We responded to Kong et al.'s call to explore the destructive results of i-deals [12] while also testing the hypothesis that competition and performance lead to hidden motivation [33] and furthering the antecedent roles of knowledge hiding from the perspective of organizational management policies [34]. Furthermore, based on the CAPS framework, we expand upon the dysfunctional cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences of i-deals and provide a new theoretical perspective for the field [35]. Second, we provide empirical evidence for the complementarity of leadership and policy factors [24,27], as well as explore the impact of organizational context on employee workplace outcomes. We examine the moderating role of ethical leadership and expand the boundary conditions of i-deals. To this end, we respond to Kui et al.'s call to investigate the "black box" of interactions when the effects of HRM practices and leadership styles are not aligned [27]. Specifically, we examine how ethical leadership can weaken the potentially destructive effects of i-deals on coworkers, demonstrating the significance of leaders' individual behaviors in remedying the shortcomings of existing management policies.

2. Theory and Hypothesis

2.1. Idiosyncratic Deals

In the late 1990s, American scholar Rousseau noted that employees often negotiate individualized work arrangements with their employers to meet their own needs and contribute effectively to the organization, which he termed "idiosyncratic deals" [6,10]. These agreements, which can be established in written or unwritten forms, are established through equal and voluntary negotiation between the organization and the employee (recipient) and provide the employee with unique working conditions that differ from those of their coworkers (bystanders) engaged in similar work [19,36]. These working conditions can involve all aspects of employment, such as compensation, working hours and locations, training and career development, job responsibilities and security, recognition and social support, or a combination of these resources. This concept has been widely accepted [37].

The existing research is divided into two perspectives: recipient and bystander [9]. The recipient perspective focuses on the positive effects on employee emotion, cognition, motivation, attitude, and behavior [38]. The bystander perspective focuses on the consequences of coworkers' perceptions of other employees' i-deals (CPOEID). The bystanders' active perception of whether and to what extent others enjoy i-deals, referred to as CPOEID [14], has the potential to positively influence coworkers to strive for self-improvement [11] and better work performance [15]. Unfortunately, CPOEID can also lead to negative consequences, such as complaints about the status quo, withdrawal, deviant behavior in the workplace [12,18], and even a competitive climate and workplace ostracism among employees [39]. To further address the destructive effects of i-deals [12], we combine talent management and knowledge management to explore the mechanism of CPOEID on knowledge hiding.

2.2. The Cognitive-Affective Processing System Framework

This study introduces the cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS) framework as a theoretical basis to explain the influence of i-deals on coworker knowledge hiding and its mechanism. The CAPS framework suggests that when individuals assess the impact of events on their resources, they will experience a series of cognitive and affective responses that lead to stable and meaningful patterns of individual behavior [13]. As a kind of key situational factor in organizations [25,27], differentiated management policies lead to differences in compensation, promotion, and organizational status among employees. On the one hand, coworkers are highly sensitive to compensation and promotions related to their vital interests [11]. On the other hand, coworkers have a fundamental motivation to pursue status [40], which makes them observe and collect information to evaluate the organizational status of i-dealers, forming perceptions of their own status [16]. Consequently, coworkers may view the implementation of i-deals as a critical event that will shape their subsequent cognitive and emotional processes [41].

Existing studies on workplace critical events based on the CAPS framework have mostly focused on the parallel study of individual cognitive (e.g., perceived insider status [42] and cognition strain [43]) and affective units (e.g., harmonious work passion [42] and vitality at work [43]). However, key events can also activate both cognitive and affective units. This results in a serial pathway that influences individual behavior [13], such as “perceived hierarchical threat–workplace anxiety” [44] and “organizational identification–affective commitment” [45]. This study, therefore, aims to examine the effects of CPOEID on coworker knowledge hiding from cognitive, affective, and serial pathways; namely, those involving ERI, psychological distress, and serial mediation “ERI–psychological distress”.

2.3. Mediating Role of Effort–Reward Imbalance

Effort–reward imbalance (ERI) occurs when an individual perceives that the amount of effort they are exerting in their job is not being adequately rewarded [46,47]. This can include higher job demands and obligations, lower salaries, a lack of respect, job insecurity, and limited career opportunities [46]. This imbalance can lead to stress-related health issues, decreased confidence in their future, and a pessimistic outlook on their long-term career prospects [22]. I-deals, one of the differentiated HRM practices, are not necessarily equitable in terms of what they offer or how they operate [48]. By gaining more trust, attention, support, and respect from leaders and having more opportunities and benefits [15], recipients may find themselves in a more privileged position than their coworkers [49]. A scarcity of organizational resources can lead to feelings of resource threat among coworkers [50], making them feel disadvantaged in comparison. Individuals tend to subjectively overestimate their own contributions to the organization while underestimating others’ contributions, making them more sensitive to perceived unfairness than fairness in the organization [18,51]. Thus, coworkers are more likely to believe that the organization treats them unfairly. A poor parallel comparison can influence an individual’s perceptions of their own effort–reward balance [20], further enhancing their ERI [52].

Employees who perceive a high degree of ERI may feel their organization has breached the reciprocal agreement with them [52], leading to an unequal distribution of rewards. As employee perceptions of workplace cost-benefit ratios deteriorate, employees who perceive ERI may respond by reducing their effort [22,53]. This reaction is often rooted in feelings of anger and betrayal, as people perceive that the organization has betrayed them and treated coworkers unfairly. This can lead to a decrease in motivation and a reluctance to share knowledge. Given the prevalence of knowledge hiding as a retaliatory measure against target employees [54], it is likely that coworkers who fear the power and authority of the leader will not express their anger and frustration towards them directly, but instead turn to retaliate against the target employees, who are in a relatively weak position [55]. Through the act of withholding expertise, information, and resources, coworkers can express their displeasure subtly and effectively. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *ERI plays a mediating role between CPOEID and knowledge hiding.*

2.4. Mediating Role of Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is a negative psychological experience generally associated with work stress, emotional exhaustion, and despair in the workplace [56]. It can lead to a range of negative emotions, such as anxiety and tension, as well as physiological symptoms of depression [57]. In severe cases, it can have a detrimental effect on job performance and career progression [58]. Recipients may possess unique contributions to the organization, special knowledge and skills, or other market value characteristics [3]. Coworkers may experience feelings of inferiority as a result of poor performance in comparison to their peers, leading to unhappy or gloomy moods [59]. Similarly, leaders' differential treatment of recipients to meet job requirements can create uncertainty among bystanders about their future access to special employment arrangements such as pay, training, or promotion opportunities [60]. This uncertainty can reduce the optimism of coworkers about the future, enhance their sense of lack of control and job insecurity [61], and cause frustration, anxiety, and even depressive emotions [62]. In addition, it has been demonstrated that CPOEID can lead to emotional exhaustion in coworkers [12].

Anxious coworkers may not have the energy to fully and objectively analyze why others have obtained i-deals, leading them to crudely assume that their supervisors favor recipients [32]. When faced with individuals who make them feel bad, they frequently resort to counterattacking or confrontational behavior [63]. To relieve their anxiety, they may ignore the recipient's claims and blame them for hiding information. Employees who experience greater psychological distress are also less likely to share their knowledge openly with others [64]. They may trigger self-protective defense mechanisms and view requests for knowledge as attempts to steal their resources. Coworkers may employ knowledge hiding tactics, such as providing lip service, to prevent further resource waste [23], improve their short-term performance, and maintain a competitive edge [33]. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *Psychological distress plays a mediating role between CPOEID and knowledge hiding.*

2.5. Serial Mediation of Effort–Reward Imbalance and Psychological Distress

According to the CAPS framework, individuals assess how events will impact their resources, prompting a sequence of cognitive and emotional internal responses. I-dealers obtain an advantage in the allocation of resources such as assignments, training opportunities, and even job promotions [19]. This may leave coworkers feeling disadvantaged and believing they are being treated unfairly [18], ultimately resulting in perceiving an ERI [20,21]. Coworkers' attempts to strike a balance between effort and reward can lead to unfavorable psychological reactions and intense emotional responses [22]. They experience not only anger and depression over the organization's harsh treatment of them [52], but also tension over whether they will be able to access similar agreements in the future and retain their status. Anxiety, depression, and tension are the main components of psychological distress [57]. Coworkers in a state of psychological distress suffer from intense work stress, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of motivation and willingness to share information [56]. To protect themselves from further resource losses, coworkers may even withhold important information [23]. In extreme cases, they may even ignore requests from i-dealers for expertise and experience. Consequently, others' obtaining i-deals (an event) will activate coworkers' cognitive units (i.e., ERI) and affective units (i.e., psychological distress) in sequence; this will ultimately affect their behavior (knowledge hiding). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. *ERI and psychological distress serially mediate the relationship between CPOEID and knowledge hiding.*

2.6. Moderating Role of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership involves setting an example of responsible, respectful behavior through one's own actions and interactions and encouraging such behavior in employees through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making [28]. They must show empathy and compassion towards their team and strive to uphold a set of core ethical values in their personal and professional lives [65]. This includes setting clear goals and delegating authority [30]. An ethical leader not only has a moral responsibility to act with integrity, fairness, and sustainability, but also encourages their subordinates, teams, and organizations to do the same [29–31]. Through social learning or role modeling [27], they will guide their followers to reach sustainable development in a principled and appropriate manner.

Situational variables like leadership style have an impact on how people understand events, thus activating cognitive units. Subordinates have confidence in high level ethical leaders to make equitable decisions based on moral principles [28,29]. Particularly when putting i-deals into practice, high level ethical leaders prioritize distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice, and information justice. This highlights the fact that recipients are rewarded for their skill or their unique contributions to the organization, confirming that the recipient deserves special treatment by the organization [35]. It also underlines that ethical leaders who prioritize fairness will provide their employees with appropriate and reciprocal rewards for their hard work and contributions [66], thereby boosting expectations that coworkers will receive similar employment arrangements in the future by enhancing their input. When others obtain i-deals, coworkers will positively perceive this as an organizational investment in the employees based on competency or performance [15]. Coworkers will correctly recognize their own lack of commitment to the organization and acknowledge the significant contributions made by others. This helps to reduce the perceived unfairness of coworkers in parallel comparisons, thus resulting in a lower ERI.

In contrast to high level ethical leaders, low level ethical leaders who are more susceptible to subordinates' popularity and ingratiation may make unjust decisions based on personal preferences and *guanxi*, which can lead to the granting of i-deals. Coworkers may perceive the implementation of i-deals as a result of managerial bias [32]. This could lead to the feeling that recipients of such rewards do not necessarily have the skills or make substantial contributions to the organization. Instead, they may have simply flattered superiors and engaged in other low effort unethical behavior. As a result, they do not believe the recipients deserve to be treated favorably by the organization. This psychological suffering not only strengthens a sense of injustice among coworkers but also erodes their confidence in their ability to receive comparable job arrangements in the future [41]. This, in turn, further worsens how coworkers perceive ERI. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. *Ethical leadership moderates the relationships between CPOEID and ERI; compared with low level ethical leadership, high level ethical leadership weakens the positive effect of CPOEID on ERI.*

Ethical leadership moderates the serial mediating role of ERI and psychological distress between CPOEID and knowledge hiding. High levels of ethical leadership can create positive outcomes. When managers make decisions based on moral principles, coworkers view recipients' access to i-deals as an investment in their performance or competence [15,29]. This leads to lower levels of ERI and psychological distress, decreasing the likelihood that coworkers will hide knowledge from recipients. In contrast, when ethical leadership is low, managers may base decisions on personal preferences. Coworkers might believe others receive i-deals as a result of managerial favoritism [32], resulting in higher ERI and negative emotions like melancholy, tension, and anxiety, which increases

the possibility that coworkers will hide knowledge from recipients to express their negative feelings. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5. *Ethical leadership moderates the serial mediating role of ERI and psychological distress between CPOEID and knowledge hiding. High level ethical leadership can reduce the serial mediation of ERI and psychological distress between CPOEID and knowledge hiding.*

In summary, the conceptual model used in this study is shown in Figure 1.

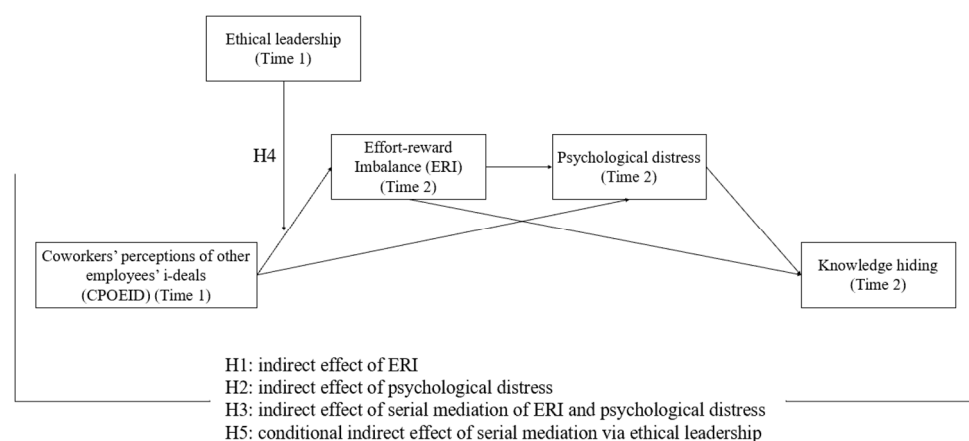


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

3. Method

3.1. Samples and Procedures

Given that knowledge-based employees with higher market competitiveness are more likely to acquire i-deals [10,11], we surveyed employees in the R&D departments of 25 provincial high-tech enterprises in Kunshan Industrial Park, China. The data collection of knowledge-based employees in the above areas is primarily based on the following considerations: Firstly, employees in Kunshan Industrial Park boast a higher educational background than the overall level and a greater number of them have obtained national professional titles. Secondly, provincial high-tech enterprises are currently experiencing rapid growth and they often adopt policies such as i-deals to recruit or develop talent to strengthen the enterprises [7]. Lastly, R&D employees are knowledge-based, giving them more opportunities to access i-deals than other departments [11]. Our study population excluded employees who already had i-deals as their perceptions of i-dealers may be influenced by their own i-deal status [39].

With the help of government staff, we obtained information on provincial high-tech enterprises located in Kunshan Industrial Park, including their industries, the number of R&D departments, and the implementation of the talent policy. We used stratified sampling to select 25 enterprises in Kunshan's four leading industries: 7 photoelectric, 3 semiconductor, 5 biomedical, and 10 intelligent manufacturing enterprises. We enlisted the assistance of their HRM departments. Considering that questionnaire surveys in management are mostly convenience sampling [67], we adopted the same approach, requiring HR to randomly select voluntary employees as samples, numbered to ensure the consistency of questionnaires across time tags. To alleviate any worries employees had about taking part in the survey, we clearly outlined the purpose and guidelines of the questionnaire. We also reassured them that the survey data were only to be used for research purposes. We also provided each employee with a small gift (worth CNY 20, or about USD 3) at the end of the survey.

Between July and December 2022, we conducted a two-wave on-site survey. In the first wave of surveys in October 2022, 375 employees provided information such as perceptions of employees' i-deals, perceptions of ethical leadership style, and demographic details. Two

weeks later, a second wave of field surveys was conducted. During this wave, employees were required to report their perceptions, such as ERI, psychological distress, knowledge hiding, and demographic characteristics (to complete questionnaire matching). A total of 321 employee surveys were eventually retrieved after removing those with missing essential variables and improperly answered attention test questions. Given our questionnaire of 45 measurement items (38 items of key variables, 5 items of control variables, and 2 items of attention tests), the sample size is 7 times greater than the number of items ($321 > 315$) and is greater than 100 [68], indicating that the sample size is adequate; 321 employee surveys yielded an effective response rate of 90.93%, with a gender split of 53.6% males and 46.4% females. The majority of respondents were between 26 and 40 years old (88.47%), had a tenure of less than 5 years (80.06%), had a bachelor's degree or higher (76.64%), and had a monthly income between CNY 7000 and CNY 12,000 (73.83%).

3.2. Measures

We used a 7-point Likert scale to measure the five core variables of coworkers' perceptions of other employees' i-deals (CPOEID), effort–reward imbalance (ERI), psychological distress, knowledge hiding, and ethical leadership. The scales used in this research had been repeatedly validated for use in the Chinese context and ranged from one (not at all) to seven (to a great extent). All items were translated into Chinese using the back translation procedures recommended by Brislin [69]. We invited two professors and two PhD students specializing in organizational behavior who are fluent in both Chinese and English to conduct the procedures. Table 1 displays the source of the scale and the number of items for the key variables.

Table 1. Measures of the key variables.

Variables	Scale Source	Item Number
Coworkers' perceptions of other employees' i-deals (CPOEID)	Ng and Feldman (2010) [70]	6
Effort–reward imbalance (ERI)	Omansky et al. (2016) [22]	6
Psychological distress	Restubog et al. (2011) [71]	4
Knowledge hiding	Connelly et al. (2012) [72]	12
Ethical leadership	Brown et al. (2005) [28]	10

3.2.1. Coworkers' Perceptions of Other Employees' i-Deals (Time 1)

Using the 6-item scale of Ng and Feldman [70], we measured the extent to which coworkers perceive i-dealers in six dimensions: a level of pay, advancement opportunities, skill training, career development opportunities, a level of job security, and support for personal problems. An example item was “The organization promises the coworker career development opportunities that most employees in the department do not enjoy”.

3.2.2. Effort–Reward Imbalance (Time 2)

We used the 6-item scale of Omansky et al. [22]. An example item was “I give a great deal of time and attention to the organization, but receive very little gratitude”.

3.2.3. Psychological Distress (Time 2)

Adapting the 4-item scale developed by Restubog et al. [71], employees self-assessed their affective reactions. One example item was “In the past month, I often felt restless at work”.

3.2.4. Knowledge Hiding (Time 2)

Using the 12-item scale developed by Connelly et al. [72], employees self-assessed the extent to which they hide knowledge from recipients. Three dimensions were evaluated: evasive concealing, rationalized hiding, and knowledge hoarding. An example of evasive concealing was “When i-dealers asked for some information (non-work confidential), I told

him that I would help him out later but stalled as much as possible.” An example of rationalized hiding was “When i-dealers asked for some information (non-work confidential), I said that I would not answer his questions.” An example of knowledge hoarding was “I never throw away any information that I think might be useful in the future”.

3.2.5. Ethical Leadership (Time 1)

We adopted the 10-item scale developed by Brown et al. [28] to measure employees’ perceptions of ethical leadership. An example item was “My leader makes fair and balanced decisions”.

3.2.6. Control Variables (Time 1)

Consistent with previous research [11,12,41], we controlled demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education, tenure, and monthly income.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model

We evaluated the measurement model based on four criteria (Table 2): factor loading, Cronbach’s α value, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Our results indicated that Cronbach’s α values exceeded the 0.8 threshold, with values ranging from 0.884 to 0.915, indicating good composite reliability. Additionally, both the CR value and AVE value were above 0.7 and 0.5, respectively, revealing that all variables had good convergent validity.

Table 2. Results of measurement model.

Variables	Mean	SD	Factor Loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach’s α
CPOEID	4.589	1.311	0.754–0.833	0.912	0.635	0.912
ERI	4.642	1.294	0.709–0.821	0.885	0.561	0.884
Psychological distress	3.815	1.534	0.812–0.860	0.899	0.691	0.898
Knowledge hiding	3.509	0.852	0.644–0.803	0.905	0.511	0.898
Ethical leadership	3.254	1.079	0.641–0.783	0.915	0.520	0.915

We employed Mplus 7.4 to conduct a series of confirmatory factor analyses to confirm the distinctiveness of focal variables. Following Rogers and Schmitt’s procedure [73], we parceled CPOEID, ERI, knowledge hiding, and ethical leadership into three items each. The results of Table 3 showed a good fit for the five-factor model ($\chi^2 = 187.245$, $df = 94$, $\chi^2/df = 1.992$, $RMSEA = 0.056$, $CFI = 0.972$, $TLI = 0.965$, $SRMR = 0.034$).

Table 3. Results of confirmatory factor analyses.

Models	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
5-Factor model	187.245	94	1.992	0.056	0.972	0.965	0.034
4-Factor model	757.685	98	7.731	0.145	0.804	0.760	0.119
3-Factor model	1313.969	101	13.010	0.193	0.640	0.572	0.139
2-Factor model	1641.064	103	15.933	0.216	0.543	0.468	0.156
1-Factor model	2282.629	104	21.948	0.255	0.353	0.253	0.187

Notes: 5-Factor model (hypothesized model), 4-Factor model (ERI and psychological distress merged), 3-Factor model (CPOEID, ERI, and psychological distress merged), 2-Factor model (CPOEID, ERI, psychological distress, and knowledge hiding merged), 1-Factor model (CPOEID, ERI, psychological distress, knowledge hiding, and ethical leadership merged). RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; and Source: Mplus 7.4 software analysis.

4.2. Test of Common Method Variance

To ensure the reliability of the results, both process control and statistical control were employed. Process control was achieved through questionnaire instructions, reverse

coding, cross-formulation, and time-lag investigation. Statistical control was achieved by two techniques: “Harman’s single-factor test” with SPSS 26.0 and “unmeasured latent method factor technique” with Mplus 7.4 [74,75]. The results showed that the largest factor explained only 26.739% of the total variance (i.e., 67.142%), which is well below the 50% threshold [76]; moreover, when we added the method factor to the CFA model, it accounted for only 4.095% of the total explained variance, which is much lower than the 25% criterion [77]; thus, the common method bias was not serious.

4.3. Correlations and Discriminant Validity

The correlation coefficients and discriminant validity of key variables are shown in Table 4. CPOEID was significantly and positively correlated with ERI, psychological distress, and knowledge hiding ($r = 0.513$; $r = 0.279$, $p < 0.01$; $r = 0.138$, $p < 0.05$). ERI has a significant and positive correlation with psychological distress and knowledge hiding ($r = 0.324$; $r = 0.275$, $p < 0.01$). Psychological distress was found to be significantly related to knowledge hiding ($r = 0.461$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the square root of the AVE is greater than all off-diagonal values, indicating that the measurement model has good discriminant validity.

Table 4. Results of correlations and discriminant validity.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. CPOEID	0.797				
2. ERI	0.513 **	0.749			
3. Psychological distress	0.279 **	0.324 **	0.831		
4. Knowledge hiding	0.138 *	0.275 **	0.461 **	0.715	
5. Ethical leadership	−0.008	−0.102	−0.157 **	−0.264 **	0.721

Notes: $N = 321$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ and two-tailed test. Numbers on the diagonal are the square root of the AVE value; and Source: SPSS 26.0 software analysis.

4.4. Hypothesis Testing

4.4.1. Test of Mediating Effect

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis using SPSS 26.0 software and the results of the mediating effects are shown in Table 5. According to Models 1, 2, and 4, CPOEID positively predicted ERI, psychological distress, and knowledge hiding ($b = 0.486$, 0.289 , $p < 0.001$; $b = 0.143$, $p < 0.05$). According to Model 5, ERI positively predicted knowledge hiding ($b = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$), while CPOEID had a non-significant effect on knowledge hiding ($b = 0.018$, $p > 0.05$). This proposes that ERI mediates relationships between CPOEID and knowledge hiding, thus tentatively supporting Hypothesis 1. According to Model 6, psychological distress positively predicted knowledge hiding ($b = 0.436$, $p < 0.001$), while CPOEID had a non-significant effect on knowledge hiding ($b = 0.016$, $p > 0.05$). This proposes that psychological distress mediates relationships between CPOEID and knowledge hiding, thus tentatively supporting Hypothesis 2. According to Models 3 and 7, ERI positively predicted psychological distress and knowledge hiding ($b = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$; $b = 0.152$, $p < 0.05$); psychological distress positively predicted knowledge hiding ($b = 0.406$, $p < 0.001$), while CPOEID had a non-significant effect on knowledge hiding ($b = -0.049$, $p > 0.05$). This tentatively supports Hypothesis 3, which proposes that ERI and psychological distress serially mediate the CPOEID–knowledge hiding relationship.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression results for the mediating effects.

Variable	ERI Model 1	Psychological Distress Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Knowledge Hiding Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
CPOEID	0.486 ***	0.289 ***	0.164 **	0.143 *	0.018	0.016	−0.049
ERI			0.257 ***		0.257 ***		0.152 *
Psychological distress						0.436 ***	0.406 ***
F	23.104 ***	5.634 ***	7.471 ***	4.339 ***	6.226 ***	14.790 ***	13.971 ***
R ²	0.293	0.080	0.124	0.059	0.103	0.232	0.245
ΔR ²			0.044		0.044	0.173	0.142

Notes: $N = 321$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; and Source: SPSS 26.0 software analysis.

A path analysis was conducted using the Mplus 7.4 software and the bootstrapping method was employed to acquire 5000 replicate samples to calculate the 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects. The results of direct and indirect effects are shown in Table 6. The indirect effect of CPOEID on knowledge hiding via ERI was 0.048, the indirect effect via psychological distress was 0.043, the indirect effect via the serial mediating role of ERI and psychological distress was 0.033, and the total indirect effect was 0.125, with significant 95% confidence intervals [0.004, 0.095], [0.010, 0.086], [0.013, 0.060], [0.072, 0.187], and 0 excluded), thus providing further support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

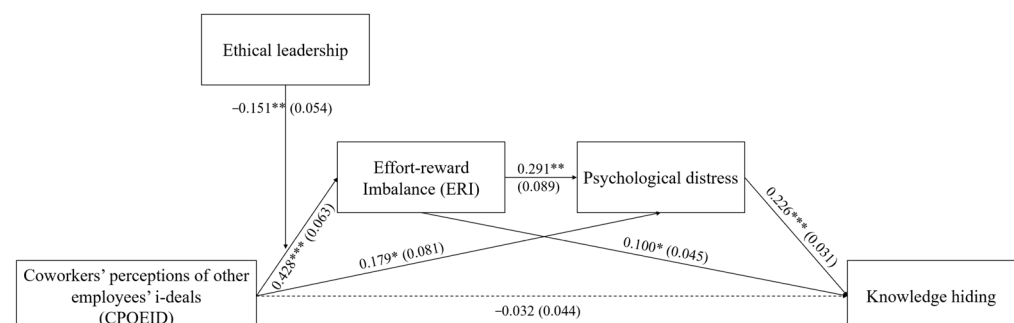
Table 6. Results of direct and indirect effects of mediators.

Path	Effects	SE	Boot 95% CI
CPOEID → ERI → Knowledge hiding	0.048 *	0.023	[0.004, 0.095]
CPOEID → Psychological distress → Knowledge hiding	0.043 *	0.019	[0.010, 0.086]
CPOEID → ERI → Psychological distress → Knowledge hiding	0.033 **	0.012	[0.013, 0.060]
Total indirect effect	0.125 ***	0.029	[0.072, 0.187]
CPOEID → Knowledge hiding	−0.032	0.044	[−0.119, 0.052]
Total effect	0.092 *	0.042	[0.010, 0.176]

Notes: $N = 321$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. SE: standard error; CI: confidence interval; and bootstrapping randomly sampled 5000 times; and Source: Mplus 7.4 software analysis.

4.4.2. Test of Moderating Effect

We used Mplus 7.4 software to perform path analysis to obtain the moderated serial mediation results, which are illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Empirical model. Notes: $N = 321$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The interaction between CPOEID and ethical leadership negatively predicted ERI ($b = -0.151$, $p < 0.01$), tentatively supporting Hypothesis 4. We used minus and plus one standard deviation from the mean of ethical leadership to plot the moderating effects (Figure 3). At low-level ethical leadership, CPOEID was positively related to ERI (simple

slope = 0.596, $p < 0.001$), whereas at high-level ethical leadership, the positive relationship was effectively weakened (simple slope = 0.261, $p < 0.05$), thus further supporting Hypothesis 4.

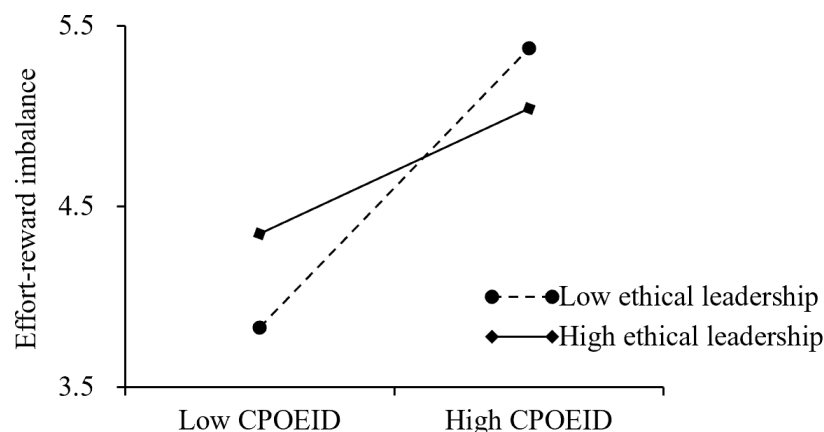


Figure 3. Interaction effect of CPOEID and ethical leadership on EIR.

The results of indirect effects are presented in Table 7. The indirect effect of CPOEID on knowledge hiding via the serial mediating role of ERI and psychological distress at high and low levels of ethical leadership was 0.017 (95% CI = [−0.003, 0.046], ns), 0.039 (95% CI = [0.016, 0.068], significant), and the difference between these values was −0.022 (95% CI = [−0.049, −0.008], significant); the indirect effect of serial mediation was weakened due to increasing ethical leadership; thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

Table 7. Results of indirect effect of moderated serial mediation.

Moderator	Indirect Effect		
Ethical Leadership	CPOEID → ERI → Psychological Distress → Knowledge Hiding	SE	Boot 95% CI
High (Mean + SD)	0.017	0.010	[−0.003, 0.046]
Low (Mean − SD)	0.039 **	0.013	[0.016, 0.068]
difference	−0.022 *	0.010	[−0.049, −0.008]

Notes: $N = 321$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. SE: standard error; CI: confidence interval; and bootstrapping randomly sampled 5000 times; and Source: Mplus 7.4 software analysis.

5. Discussion

Based on the CAPS framework, this study aims to explore the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of the effects of CPOEID on coworker knowledge hiding. The key findings are reflected in the following six aspects:

First, we investigate the potentially detrimental outcomes of i-deals from the bystander perspective, thereby enhancing the impact of HRM practices on knowledge interactions. Knowledge management centers on managing talented employees who possess tacit knowledge [2]. Differentiated HRM practices are effective in attracting, motivating, and retaining talented employees with valuable specialized knowledge and skills [11,14,35], as well as promoting the sharing and dissemination of knowledge and experience [8]. However, for bystanders, non-standardized management policies can lead to an impression of unfair treatment [6,18,35], which could negatively affect their knowledge behavior. Our findings explore the positive relationship between CPOEID and knowledge hiding (0.143 *). In doing so, we respond to Kong et al.'s call to explore the destructive results of i-deals [12], while testing the hypothesis that competition and performance lead to hidden motivation [33] and furthering the antecedent roles of knowledge hiding from the perspective of organizational management policies [34].

In addition, our study explores the positive effects of CPOEID on ERI (0.486 ***). Special treatment of talented employees in i-deals can make coworkers feel that the manager prefers talented employees and that their own resources are threatened, resulting in a perception of unfair treatment and an increase in ERI. From the perspective of effort–reward imbalance, we refine employees’ perceptions of injustice in accordance with the research on differentiated human resource management practices [10,48]. We also explore the mediating role of ERI (indirect effect: 0.048 *) in support of Hypothesis 1, indicating that CPOEID indirectly affects knowledge hiding through ERI. This states that ERI leads to a decrease in willingness to share knowledge and attempts to express their dissatisfaction skillfully and effectively by concealing expertise, information, and resources, which is consistent with research on “negative cognition—knowledge hiding” [54,78].

Correspondingly, our findings also demonstrate a positive relationship between CPOEID and psychological distress (0.289 ***). This suggests that when i-dealers are favored by the organization, their coworkers may feel unhappy or depressed as a result of their disadvantage in comparison, leading to decreased optimism about the future. This is in line with previous research that has concluded that differentiated treatment can lead to coworkers’ negative emotions, such as envy [11,79]. We explored the mediating role of psychological distress (indirect effect: 0.043 *) and found evidence to support Hypothesis 2, which suggests that CPOEID indirectly affects knowledge hiding through psychological distress. Psychologically distressed coworkers may engage in counterattacking or confrontational behaviors, perceive the recipient’s request for knowledge as a conspiracy to steal resources, and employ knowledge hiding strategies to prevent further resource waste. To this end, we respond to the “negative emotion–knowledge hiding” research call [80] to further investigate the antecedents of emotional factors in knowledge hiding [81,82] and provide evidence to support the view that knowledge hiding is a resource preservation strategy [58].

As noted, our findings demonstrate that differentiated HRM practices have dysfunctional effects on the cognition, affect, and behavior of non-beneficiaries, which can help to systematically understand the role of i-deals on employees [3]. We connect individual cognitive and affective pathways and present a novel theoretical perspective for the field of i-deals using the CAPS framework [35]. Specifically, we examine the positive relationship between ERI and psychological distress (0.257 ***) and find that ERI and psychological distress play a serial mediating role between CPOEID and knowledge hiding (indirect effect: 0.033 *). The results support Hypothesis 3, indicating that CPOEID leads to coworkers’ perception of ERI, which in turn leads to psychological distress and knowledge hiding. Our findings are consistent with research on key events [58], further validating the explanatory mechanism of “key events–rational and sensible transformation–coping strategies”.

More importantly, we examine the moderating role of ethical leadership and expand the boundary conditions of i-deals. Previous research has focused largely on individual-level factors, such as performance similarity and coworkers’ beliefs in obtaining future i-deals [14,32], overlooking the influence of situational factors on employees’ work settings. Notably, the organizational implementation of i-deals is a three-way game between the grantor (manager), the recipient (employee), and the bystander (coworker) [9]. To better understand i-deals, leadership styles may play a critical role in the two-way interactions between i-dealers and coworkers [3]. We combine leader honesty with fair decision making behavior to examine the impact of ethical leadership on cognitive activation [28,29]. Specifically, ethical leaders who emphasize fairness will provide appropriate and reciprocal rewards to employees for their hard work and contributions. This makes coworkers feel that i-deals are the organization’s investment in employees’ abilities or performance, rather than the result of the managers’ personal preferences. They believe that their increased effort can lead to similar employment arrangements in the future, effectively reducing their sense of ERI. The results of this study support Hypothesis 4, which states that the interaction of ethical leadership and i-deals has a negative effect on ERI (−0.151**), thus showing that ethical leadership serves as a moderator between CPOEID and ERI.

Finally, we provide empirical support for the complementarity of leadership and policy factors, as well as explore the impact of organizational context on employee workplace outcomes. Scholars have increasingly suggested that leadership and policy factors are not independent, but rather influence each other's roles [25,26]. Integrating HRM practices and leadership styles creates organizational contextual factors that comprehensively reflect individual consequences [24,27]. Previous research has mainly focused on the positive benefits of combining management policies and leadership behaviors [83,84]. We respond to Kui et al.'s call to investigate the "black box" of interactions when the effects of HRM practices and leadership styles are not aligned [27]. We examine how ethical leadership can weaken the potentially destructive effects of i-deals on coworkers, highlighting the importance of leaders' individual behaviors in remedying the shortcomings of existing management policies. To this end, we explore the negative effects of the interaction of ethical leadership and i-deals on the serial mediation of ERI and psychological distress (indirect effect difference between high and low levels: -0.022^*), supporting Hypothesis 5, i.e., ethical leadership not only reduces the effect of CPOEID on coworkers' negative cognition and affection but also weakens coworkers' tendency to hide their knowledge. However, the difference value was poor (less than 0.1), which may be due to ethical leadership being an external factor, rather than a direct internal feeling. Ethical leadership provides a fair endorsement for management policies and can influence employees' attribution tendencies [11,66] and, thus, their cognitive and emotional responses, but its direct influence on cognitive and emotional responses is relatively weak. Future studies should explore the boundary conditions of individual characteristics such as attribution tendency.

5.1. Practical Implications

Our research offers practical insights for i-dealers, coworkers, managers, and organizations. I-dealers should take steps to reduce hostile feelings among bystanders and cultivate interpersonal trust and support. Bystanders comprise the majority of the organization and their attitudes can have a significant impact on the success of individual agreements [10]. To ensure the sustained operation of businesses, i-dealers need to take action to gain the understanding and support of onlookers. To do this, i-dealers should be proactive in interactions, build trust and partnership with bystanders, and increase work engagement. By reducing knowledge hiding among bystanders and encouraging the free flow of knowledge, we can help ensure the sustainable growth of enterprises.

Coworkers need to let go of ingrained prejudices and hostile feelings they may have. Knowledge hiding is an unproductive form of retaliation, and can lead to a "lose–lose–lose" or "win–win–lose" situation [9]. Instead, they should objectively assess events and set aside any preconceived notions or dissatisfaction with the manager. They can then strive to obtain similar employment arrangements by investing in self-improvement, such as observation and inquiry about feedback. These efforts can not only benefit coworkers in their career goals, but also foster a virtuous cycle of knowledge within the team, contributing to team and organizational performance in the long term.

Managers should cultivate an ethical leadership style by acting with integrity, fairness, and transparency in their behavior and making decisions equitably. Unethical leadership may seem beneficial in the short term but it can have a detrimental effect on long-term growth, stifling development opportunities and putting a company's competitive advantage at risk. Implementing i-deals as a differentiated HR practice is unlikely to be completely fair [48]. To prevent employees from misunderstanding the process, managers should promptly and objectively publicize the negotiating process and content of i-deals while fostering a fair and equitable organizational climate. This way, bystanders are more likely to evaluate i-deals favorably as they will believe the organization is effectively maintaining employment fairness and will subsequently adopt sensible coping strategies.

Organizations should be mindful of bystanders when implementing i-deals as the best talent can only provide the greatest benefit to the organization when integrated into a team environment that values teamwork [85]. To help manage employee emotions, organizations

should invest in training on stress management and emotion regulation. Furthermore, organizations should prioritize building relationships with employees that extend beyond financial considerations. This will result in increased loyalty and reliability, thus reducing the occurrence of knowledge hiding.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

The present research offers valuable insights and directions for future research, which have meaningful implications from both a theoretical and practical perspective. However, we acknowledge the limitations of the research and suggest potential ways to address them. Specifically, the time-lag design effectively controlled for endogeneity, though the data could not verify causal relationships. To further improve the explanatory power of the model, future research could employ experimental manipulations. Additionally, this study examined the serial mediation of ERI and psychological distress. To deepen our understanding of this relationship, future studies could add the antecedent role of affective factors in knowledge hiding [81,82] and investigate the mediating role of negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and hostility. Finally, recipients must mitigate bystanders' hostile attitudes and gain their support for i-deals [35]. Future research should explore the moderating role of i-dealers' behaviors (e.g., helping behaviors, knowledge sharing, etc.) to increase the managerial effectiveness of differentiated HRM policies.

6. Conclusions

Profitable knowledge interactions not only benefit from knowledge sharing among talented employees but also can be undermined by the negative knowledge behaviors of coworkers. Achieving a broad consensus and collective effort among stakeholders within the enterprise (including managers, i-dealers, and coworkers) is essential in order to create a virtuous circle of knowledge and then ensure the sustainable development of the enterprise. Despite the demonstrated knowledge facilitating effects of i-deals, differentiated HRM policies may have potentially dysfunctional consequences, highlighting the need for a theoretical framework that explores why and how coworkers engage in knowledge hiding behaviors. Our theoretical model outlines the destructive cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses of bystanders after perceiving others' i-deals, i.e., CPOEID exacerbates coworkers' sense of effort–reward imbalance, psychological distress, and knowledge hiding. As such, we do not therefore deny the managerial effects of i-deals; rather, we argue that deficiencies in management systems can be remedied using positive leadership styles, i.e., ethical leadership is effective in attenuating the detrimental consequences of i-deals. The rational use of policy and leadership factors is conducive to organizational knowledge management and sustainable development.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The introduction of the questionnaire provided information about the purpose of the study, the social value and benefits, the scope of information collected, potential privacy risks, and countermeasures. In addition, the signature and contact information of the researcher and research organization were included. Participants were asked to read the introduction of the questionnaire and then fill out a written informed consent form. As a result, the ethical risk of this study was low and was approved by Nanjing University, China, without the need for further ethical review.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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