Work experiences that are developmentally challenging—such as creating change, assuming high levels of responsibility, taking unfamiliar responsibilities, working across boundaries, and managing diversity (DeRue & Wellman, 2009; McCauley et al., 1994)—matter for the development of leaders, with reviews suggesting "upward of 70% of all leadership development occurs through informal, on-the-job experiences" (DeRue & Wellman, 2009, p. 859; see also, Clardy, 2018; Day et al., 2021). Such challenges are often 'high stakes,' with their success or failure highly visible to top management (e.g., Kotter, 1982; McCall et al., 1988). Because teams constitute the "basic building blocks" of contemporary organizations (Kozlowski & Bell, 2013, p. 333), these challenges often take the form of team projects that generate consequential success–failure outcomes. Project success–failure is typically defined as a continuous project outcome vis-à-vis a given reference point, such as a goal set by the company (Edmondson, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2011). Outcomes falling short of this reference point are regarded as failures, whereas outcomes that meet or exceed this point are considered successes (McGrath, 1999). As Wallace et al. (2021, p. 3) note, "such outcomes… are the precursors to learning through lived experiences."

Prior research has greatly advanced our understanding of the role of developmental challenges for leader development (Day et al., 2014; Day et al., 2021). Despite these important insights, we note two limitations. First, prior research commonly examined developmental challenges without explicitly theorizing about their *timing,* i.e., *when* they exert stronger or weaker effects on leaders. For instance, DeRue and Wellman's (2009) study of the effect of developmental challenges on leader skill development did not examine at which career stages the middle- and senior-level managers in their sample faced these challenges. This conflicts with Role Transition Theory (RTT; Anglin et al., 2022; Ashforth, 2000; George et al., 2022; Nicholson, 1984), which suggests that experiences occurring during role transition periods exert outsized influences on leaders. Work role transitions are

defined as "the psychological (and, where relevant, physical) movement between roles, including disengagement from one role (role exit) and engagement in another (role entry)" (Ashforth, 2000, p. 3). Because individuals are especially susceptible to external cues and demands during role transitions, work experiences in these periods can exert outsized influences on their development. To address this limitation, we examine the link between *temporally varied* project success-failure experiences and leader development. Specifically, we compare and contrast project success-failure experiences during non-transitional periods with those occurring during two well-established transition periods: (1) after individuals start their first job (i.e., the transition from education to work; Blokker et al., 2023; Ng & Feldman, 2007) and (2) after they assume their first leadership role (e.g., Fletcher & French, 2021).

The second limitation is that "relatively little attention has been given to mindsets in the leadership domain" (Gottfredson & Reina, 2021, p. 440), despite mindsets being recognized as "ideal personal attribute to focus on to improve leaders' effectiveness" (pp. 441-442). A mindset refers to a "mental frame or lens that selectively organizes and encodes information, thereby orienting an individual toward a unique way of understanding an experience and guiding one toward corresponding actions and responses" (Crum et al., 2013, p. 717). Despite recognition that leader mindsets matter for leader effectiveness (Gottfredson & Reina, 2021; Jeanes, 2021), the leader development literature offers little insight into whether and how temporally varied experiences from developmental challenges shape leader mindsets (Wallace et al., 2021).

To address this second limitation, our research draws on Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) within the framework of RTT. According to RTT, the primary outcome of role transitions involves personal changes in motivational mindsets (Nicholson, 1984), although the theory does not specify which types of mindsets are subject to such changes. RFT helps address this issue by proposing that leaders' regulatory foci represent the relevant mindsets

linked to success and failure experiences (e.g., Förster et al., 2001; Neubert et al., 2013; Trope & Neter, 1994). RFT suggests that social environments emphasizing potential gains (e.g., project success) induce a promotion focus, whereas environments highlighting potential losses (e.g., project failure) induce a prevention focus (Higgins & Silberman, 1998; Neubert et al., 2008). Building on RTT, we argue that these regulatory focus 'states', when triggered by project success–failure experiences during career transitions, may crystallize into enduring 'mindsets' (Neubert et al., 2008). Understanding RFT within the framework of RTT therefore positions regulatory focus as a central motivational mindset. This mindset, in turn, can lead to distinct performance outcomes—promotion focus to creative performance and prevention focus to routine performance (e.g., Janssen et al., 2024; Pearsall et al., 2023; Said, 2016).

We test our model in a decade-long study of 132 team leaders, tracking them from career entry beyond their first leadership roles. Our research makes three contributions to leader development research and RTT. First, we show that timing matters: the same project success–failure experience shapes leaders' motivational mindsets differently depending on when it occurs, highlighting the transition from education to work as a formative yet understudied stage. Second, we extend research on the development of leader mindsets by demonstrating how temporally varied work experiences shape leader motivational orientations that predict downstream performance. Third, we extend RTT through explicit theorizing about the relative developmental influence of distinct transition periods.

Theory and Hypothesis Development

Leader Development During Role Transitions

The leader development literature has recognized role transitions as key periods for leader development (e.g., McCall et al., 1988; McCauley et al., 1994)—albeit without theorizing or examining different types of transitions, or whether developmental challenges occurred specifically during transition periods. Role Transition Theory (RTT; Anglin et al.,

2022; Ashforth, 2000; George et al., 2022; Nicholson, 1984; Nicholson & West, 1988) offers theoretical depth on the complex nature of such transitions, and how they may interplay with project success-failure experiences. RTT highlights role transitions as critical periods when work experiences can exert outsized influences on employees. During transitions, employees become cognitively malleable and emotionally vulnerable to events such as project success–failure (Ashforth, 2000). Such transitions can lead to primary changes in motivational mindsets (also termed, motivational orientations) and leadership skills (Nicholson, 1984). Based on Mumford et al.'s (2007) model of leadership skill requirements, leader development researchers have conceptualized leadership skills as "consisting of the cognitive, interpersonal, business, and strategic skills required to effectively influence people and processes in organizations" (DeRue & Wellman, 2009, p. 860). Yet "the issue of skills is beyond the scope" of RTT (Nicholson, 1984; p. 182), as skill development is highly context-dependent. Instead, RTT mainly focuses on motivational mindsets. It suggests that employees often encounter psychological mismatches between their existing motivational mindsets and work experiences (e.g., success-failure outcomes) during role transitions—a dissonance they resolve by adjusting motivational mindsets to align with these experiences. Through this adaptive process, motivational mindsets consolidate and become more stable and enduring during subsequent non-transitional periods, when stress and role uncertainty are lower.

The first sensitive role transition that RTT recognizes occurs at the start of one's professional career following formal education. This phase represents a critical transition from the world of education to that of work (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013, p. 200). We refer to this period as the "primary sensitive period" because it captures an individual's initial work experiences. During this period, individuals are more of a "blank slate" (Higgins, 2005; McEvily et al., 2012) as they become exposed to work-related environmental stimuli for the very first time. Thus, they are likely to experience cognitive unfreezing, where their cognitive

models are challenged and subsequently replaced with alternatives that are more congruent with the novel environment (Dokko et al., 2009). In fact, RTT argues that "absorption is most intense at early career stages when occupational inexperience guarantees that the novelty of role demands will be high" (Nicholson, 1984, p. 176).

Another significant role transition with heightened susceptibility recognized by RTT is the transition into a first formal leadership role (Fletcher & French, 2021). Taking on leadership for the first time requires mastering new job demands and adapting to a shift in control (Li et al., 2018; Sherman et al., 2012). Novice leaders assume line management responsibilities, oversee team members from diverse functional and task backgrounds (Oh et al., 2006), and act as "linking pins" connecting their teams with the wider organization (Venkataramani et al., 2014). Such role transitions increase stress levels by imposing multiple demands on novice leaders, which may render them more susceptible to environmental influences as a means to reduce stress (Ashforth, 2000). RTT argues that one of "the most stressful job changes are those which involve an upward status move" (Nicholson & West, 1988, p. 104). We refer to the initial period of individuals' first formal leadership roles as the "secondary sensitive period." Outside these sensitive periods —termed "non-sensitive periods"—individuals progressing through their careers up to their first leadership role tend to face lower levels of uncertainty and are less susceptible to environmental influences.

Building on RTT, our research examines *when* project success–failure experiences exert outsized effects on leaders' motivational mindsets by comparing transitional and non-transitional periods. However, RTT does not specify which particular mindsets are affected. To address this issue, we draw on Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT; Higgins, 1997), which identifies regulatory focus as especially sensitive to experiences of success and failure.

Project Success–Failure and Team Leaders' Regulatory Focus Mindsets

At the core of RFT (Higgins & Pinelli, 2020) are two unique, independent routes to self-regulation in approaching pleasure and avoiding pain: promotion and prevention foci. A promotion focus is concerned with accomplishments and aspirations and is focused on the attainment of the "ideal self" (Higgins, 1997). It prompts people to proactively pursue the attainment of positive end-states (i.e., gains) and to avoid end-states with a low likelihood of positive outcomes (i.e., non-gains). In contrast, a prevention focus is concerned with safety and responsibilities and is focused on the "ought self" (Higgins, 1997). It prompts people to avoid mistakes and negative end-states (i.e., losses) and to approach end-states with a low likelihood of negative outcomes (i.e., non-losses).

RFT proposes that a situation that signals the pleasantness of gains (Higgins, 1997) or teaches the desirability of positive outcomes (Higgins & Silberman, 1998; Neubert et al., 2013) can induce a promotion focus. Project success represents such a gain-signaling situation. Employees who experience project success set advancement or success as a desirable end-state that should be approached or pursued ("+1"; gain). These employees are also likely to perceive the status quo or project outcome that does not offer such a positive experience as an undesirable end-state that should be avoided ("0"; non-gain; Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). This means that greater project success is likely to induce a stronger promotion focus state. Conversely, RFT posits that situations signaling the unpleasantness of losses or reinforcing the undesirability of negative outcomes can induce a prevention focus state (Higgins, 1997; Neubert et al., 2008). Project failure represents such a loss-signaling situation. Employees who experience project failure are likely to construe this outcome as an undesirable end-state to be avoided ("-1"; loss) and to orient toward preventing its recurrence, thereby approaching a non-loss state ("0"; non-loss; Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). That is, greater project failure is likely to induce a stronger prevention focus state.

Taken together, project success-failure experiences can induce *temporary states* of promotion and prevention focus. Building on RTT (Ashforth, 2000; George et al., 2022; Nicholson, 1984), we further propose that these temporary states can crystallize into enduring mindsets when project success–failure experiences—highly impactful and critical events (Shepherd, 2003; Shepherd et al., 2009; Shepherd et al., 2011)—occur during sensitive periods of transition. This solidification of psychological states into more lasting mindsets aligns with RTT's core tenet that employees undergo lasting personal changes (or "personal developments") to reduce uncertainty during role transitions (Nicholson, 1984).

> *Hypothesis 1:* The extent to which team leaders experience success during sensitive periods of transition, compared with non-sensitive periods, is a stronger predictor of a promotion-focused mindset (H1a). The extent to which team leaders experience failure during sensitive periods of transition, compared with non-sensitive periods, is a stronger predictor of a prevention-focused mindset (H1b).

Although our main goal is to show that leaders' project success–failure experiences during *sensitive* periods, compared with those during *non-sensitive* periods, can have lasting effects on leader mindsets, we additionally theorize whether the two identified sensitive periods differ in developmental power. The leader development literature recognizes that "the developmental power of a transition varies with the degree of unfamiliarity that the job problems, responsibilities, and choices pose" (McCauley et al., 1994, p. 545). RTT refers to this developmental power as transition magnitude (Ashforth, 2000; also referred to as novelty of job demands; Nicholson, 1984) and posits that experiences occurring during higher-magnitude transitions exert a stronger influence on employees (Ashforth, 2000; Latack, 1984). Magnitude captures "the degree of role contrast; […] the number of core and peripheral features of the role identity that changes and the extent of the changes, where core features are weighted more heavily" (Ashforth, 2000, p. 89). This magnitude, in turn, may depend on the role segmentation-role integration continuum (Ashforth, 2000). Segmented roles are marked by sharp contrasts in role identities and rigid, impermeable boundaries. In

contrast, integrated roles involve lower contrasts and more flexible, permeable boundaries. RTT predicts that transitions into highly segmented roles are high in magnitude and thus more impactful for motivational mindsets.

Against this backdrop, we argue that project success–failure experiences that occur during the primary sensitive period exert stronger effects than those occurring during the secondary period. The transition from education to work is a highly *segmented* shift, as organizational context and tasks are entirely new. By contrast, entering a first leadership role, though demanding (Ashforth, 2000), occurs within the world of work, and often within the same organization. Novice leaders are less of a "blank slate" (Higgins, 2005; McEvily et al., 2012), as they can draw on prior work experience and cognitive models that reflect organizational realities (Dokko et al., 2009). They likely have encountered project success–failure previously, reducing the novelty and intensity of recurring similar experiences. This renders the secondary sensitive period a more *integrated* transition of lower magnitude.

> *Hypothesis 2:* The extent to which team leaders experience success during the primary, compared to the secondary, sensitive period of transition, is a stronger predictor of a promotion-focused mindset (H2a). The extent to which team leaders experience failure during the primary, compared to the secondary, sensitive period of transition, is a stronger predictor of a prevention-focused mindset (H2b).

Leaders' Regulatory Focus Mindsets and Team Creative vs. Routine Performance

Our research further proposes that leaders' regulatory focus mindsets shaped by past project success–failure experiences have distinct impacts on their teams' routine and creative performance, two outcomes that impose opposing demands on teams (March, 1991). Routine performance captures the successful completion of tasks that require teams to conform to organizational routines, rules, regulations, and protocols while avoiding mistakes and errors (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). By contrast, creative performance refers to novel and useful work and emphasizes proactive deviations from extant routines, rules, regulations, and protocols in an original and meaningful way (Amabile, 1982; Madjar et al., 2011).

We propose that each of these team outcomes is triggered by a different team leader regulatory focus mindset. On the one hand, we suggest that leaders' prevention focus mindset facilitates their teams' routine performance. Because team leaders with a strong prevention focus mindset are motivated by "oughts" as distinct motivational end-states (Higgins, 1997), they emphasize error prevention, safety, and caution (Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). As a result, they may guide their teams toward strict adherence to existing routines and a heightened focus on avoiding errors and mistakes. On the other hand, we suggest that leaders' promotion focus mindset facilitates their teams' creative performance. Leaders with a strong promotion focus are motivated by "ideals" as distinct motivational end-states (Higgins, 1998), pursuing ambitions, aspirations, and new initiatives. These leaders are likely to encourage risk-taking and exploration—key drivers of team creativity (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007).[1]

> *Hypothesis 3:* Team leaders' promotion focus mindset is positively related to team creative performance.
> *Hypothesis 4:* Team leaders' prevention focus mindset is positively related to team routine performance.

Integrating these arguments into an overall framework, we propose a mediation model in which the extent of team leaders' prior project success–failure experiences during the two sensitive periods of transition predicts the extent of team creative vs. routine performance through their regulatory focus mindsets.

> *Hypothesis 5:* The extent to which team leaders experience success during sensitive, compared to non-sensitive, periods of transition indirectly predicts the extent of team creative performance through a mindset high in promotion focus (H5a), and the extent to which team leaders experience failure during sensitive, compared to non-sensitive, periods of transition indirectly predicts the extent of team routine performance through a mindset high in prevention focus (H5b).

Method

Transparency and Openness

[1] Because RFT is unspecific with respect to cross-over effects (i.e. leader promotion focus predicting team routine performance and leader prevention focus predicting team creative performance), we did not develop formal hypotheses about them but instead explored such cross-over effects in the supplemental material.

We describe our sampling plan, all data exclusions, and all study measures, within the manuscript. We adhered to the Journal of Applied Psychology methods checklist. Analysis codes, result outputs, and research materials are available from the authors on request. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) and STATA, version 17. We used data obtained from a broader dataset examining the consequences of leaders' past experiences, of which this is the first publication. Ethics approval was granted from the University of Cambridge (Protocol No. 19-042).

Research Context and Participants

We collected multisource (archival records, leaders, department heads) and multiwave field data from the leaders of 132 design teams of an East Asian international fashion company. The company designs and manufactures apparel and footwear for export and operates a single design department composed of small teams of three to four members, including a leader (M = 3.02, SD = .12). Each team designs new products, prepares implementation manuals for manufacturing, and addresses customer requests. A weekly committee, chaired by the department head, evaluates the teams' proposed designs, typically approving one to three per year. Approved designs become formal projects that advance through stages in collaboration with manufacturing, finance, and marketing, culminating in production. Upon completion, teams are debriefed on project outcomes (see description of success–failure below). Each team works on one approved project at a time. Team leaders have substantial discretion in selecting new employees—predominantly (over 95%) entry-level hires. It takes about five years for new employees to become team leaders, during which they complete an average of 8.44 projects (SD = 1.44). Promotions are based on qualitative evaluations by the current leader and the department head, along with performance records.

Data Collection Procedures

We tracked 132 team leaders from the start of their careers (Time 1) through their promotion into a formal leadership role (Time 3) and up to five years after assuming their first leadership position (Time 6) (see Figure 2).

Archival records Time 1 to Time 3. We adopted a contextualized approach (Maloney et al., 2016) to operationalize sensitive periods spanning the completion of the first holistic project in the new role (either as team member or as novice leader), and non-transition periods as phases of role stability. Time 1 represents the *primary sensitive period*—when leaders began their careers after university and completed their first team projects as members. Time 3 represents the *secondary sensitive period*—when leaders assumed their first leadership role and completed their initial projects as novice leaders. Time 2 denotes a *non-transitional period* between these stages with no formal role changes. Leaders completed an average of 8.44 projects during Time 2, one of which was randomly selected. Finance and HR evaluated project performance using ROI data for all projects completed by team leaders.

Survey data Time 4 to Time 6. We distributed surveys to the 132 team leaders and the department head to collect additional data regarding team leaders' regulatory focus mindsets (Times 4 and 6) and team outcomes (Time 5). We test our main model (Figure 1) with data obtained at Times 1 to 5. Response rate at Time 5 was 89.76% (149 of 166 leaders). Removing 13 leaders hired after Time 1 and four leaders who had started their careers in other companies resulted in a final sample of 132 team leaders (79.51%). Seventy-six leaders were female (57.6%). Leaders averaged 34.25 years (SD = 3.41). Average organizational tenure was 6.42 years (SD = 1.13) at Time 5. All leaders had degrees that required at least two years of college education. Response rate at Time 6 was reduced to 70.48% (117 of 166 leaders) due to turnovers between Times 5 and 6.

Measures

We translated the English version of the survey into the local language using translation-reverse translation procedures (Brislin, 1990)[2]. All items featured a 7-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*). Table 1 shows descriptives and correlations.

Success–failure of a team project. The study company internally measured the success–failure of each design project using the following ROI formula:

$$\frac{Financial\ Gain\ from\ the\ Project - Cost\ of\ Total\ Investment\ in\ the\ Project}{Cost\ of\ Total\ Investment\ in\ the\ Project}$$

To estimate gains and costs of a project, the company had its own internally agreed-upon method that it clearly communicated to employees. Financial gains from a new product primarily referred to sales, whereas costs included designers' salaries, task materials, and market tests preceding mass production. Matching our definition of project success-failure (McGrath, 1999), a positive value represents project success (i.e., gains exceed costs), while a negative value represents project failure (i.e., costs exceed gains), thereby forming a continuous variable capturing the entire spectrum of minor and major successes and failures. We obtained three ROIs per team leader (at Times 1, 2, and 3).[3]

Regulatory focus mindsets. We measured promotion and prevention focus mindsets with nine items each with the regulatory focus mindset scale (Neubert et al., 2008) at T4 and T6. Sample items are: "I take chances at work to maximize my goals for advancement." (promotion focus) and "I concentrate on completing tasks correctly to increase my job

[2] Two postgraduate students with relevant subject knowledge and fluency in the local language and English translated all items and resolved any discrepancies. Another two equally qualified students then back-translated the items into English, again discussing and resolving differences. Finally, a bilingual academic compared back-translated and original items to check for meaning differences—none were found, ending the process.

[3] Repeated-measures ANOVA found no differences in ROIs across these periods ($F = .281$, $p = .755$). Because self-reported perceptions of success or failure are susceptible to defensive reactions, memory distortions, and self-enhancement biases, we followed prior research and employed an objective rather than subjective measure of success-failure outcomes (e.g., Deichmann & Ende, 2014; Kc et al., 2013; Wilhelm et al., 2019). This aligns with our interest in capturing the effect of temporally varied project outcomes rather than participants' perception of these outcomes.

security." (prevention focus). To improve the reliability and factor structure of the promotion focus mindset scale, we dropped one item.

Team creativity. At T5, we measured team creativity in two ways. First, the department head rated each team on the four-item team creativity scale (Shin & Zhou, 2007). A sample item is "How creative do you consider this team to be?" Second, we used an objective measure of team creativity, the number of new design ideas proposed by each team between T4 and T5. Capturing different aspects of creativity, the first measure represents creative performance as a higher authority's evaluation of each team's creative outputs, whereas the second captures the result of each team's creative behavior (Montag et al., 2012).

Team routine performance. Routine performance (T5) was captured as the percentage of deadlines that each team successfully met for addressing stakeholders' requests and complaints. One of the most important tasks of designer teams is to address requests from internal stakeholders (e.g., inquiries from manufacturing lines) and requests and/or complaints from external customers, which commonly relate to minor details and/or technical issues with designs. Thus, designers can usually resolve them comfortably. Meeting deadlines is important to avoid delays in manufacturing processes as well as customer dissatisfaction.

Controls. The selection of control variables was guided by theoretical and empirical considerations (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Leader gender (coded 0=male, 1=female) is related to how leaders lead teams (Eagly et al., 1992). Organizational tenure (in years) reflects the extent of employees' accumulated work experience and is therefore associated with their level of susceptibility during transition periods. Given the leader development literature's focus on skill enhancement, we controlled for leader skills using an archival record from the company's annual performance evaluation. This context-specific assessment rated each leader's business, cognitive and interpersonal skills, ranging from 'A' (highest; coded as 4) to 'D' (lowest; coded as 1). As predicted by the strataplex model (Mumford et al.,

2007), strategic skill requirements were less relevant for the relatively junior leaders in our sample (1st leadership position). Instead, the company emphasized cognitive and interpersonal skills. The department head conducted the evaluations at T5 (assessed skills were speaking, listening, team coordination, team harmony, conflict mediation, and managerial thinking). As personality variables have been linked to leader development (e.g., DeRue et al., 2012), we controlled for leaders' Big Five (mini-IPIP; Donnellan et al., 2006). An example item is "I get chores done right away (conscientiousness)". To account for culture-specific factors related to leadership and the sensitive nature of failure experiences, we controlled for leader ratings of perceived face-saving culture (e.g., "I'm embarrassed when my weakness or mistakes are revealed to others"; Shin & Zhou, 2007). Since prior projects may affect learning, we controlled for number of projects leaders had worked on prior to their first leadership role (between T1 and T3). Finally, we controlled for year of ROI T2. Exclusion of controls produced virtually identical results. CFA results, available from the authors on request, demonstrate good model fit.

Results

H1 proposed that during sensitive periods, project success predicts a promotion focus mindset (H1a), while project failure predicts a prevention focus mindset (H1b). We first tested the primary sensitive period, assessing the relationship between project success–failure experiences during this period (ROI T1) and team leaders' regulatory focus mindsets T4. Multiple regression analysis showed that ROI T1 was positively related to team leaders' promotion focus mindset T4 (b = .41, SE = .13, t = 3.15, p = .002) but negatively related to their prevention focus mindset T4 (b = -.74, SE = .14, t = -5.15, p < .001; Table 2). Second, we also examined whether ROI T1 has stronger relationships with regulatory focus mindsets at T4 compared to ROI T2 (non-sensitive period). To this end, we examined the significance of the difference in regression coefficients of ROI T1 versus ROI T2 on regulatory focus

mindsets T4, using the comparative coefficient test with STATA's 'test' command. ROI T1 was significantly more positively related to a promotion focus mindset T4 ($F(1, 117) = 11.98$, $p = .001$) and significantly more negatively related to a prevention focus mindset T4 ($F(1, 117) = 18.13$, $p < .001$) than ROI T2. At T6 (approximately 10 years later), the effects of ROI T1 on promotion ($b = .24$, SE = .10, $t = 2.46$, $p = .016$) as well as prevention focus mindset ($b = -.58$, SE = .17, $t = -3.15$, $p = .001$) were still significant (see Table 3), and additional analysis (see supplemental material) showed that the decline of these effects from T4 to T6 was non-significant. Together, these tests support H1a and b for the primary sensitive period.

For the secondary sensitive period, regression analyses showed that the project success–failure experience (i.e., ROI T3) was *not* significantly related to team leaders' promotion focus mindset T4 ($b = .19$, $SE = .11$, $t = 1.78$, $p = .079$), *nor* was it related to their prevention focus mindset T4 ($b = -.13$, $SE = .12$, $t = -1.12$, $p = .265$; Table 2). Given these non-significant results, conducting further analyses was not meaningful. These findings suggest that H1a and H1b were *not* supported for the secondary sensitive period.

The findings supporting H1 for the primary but not the secondary sensitive period further supported H2, which predicted that the effects of project outcomes on regulatory focus mindsets would be stronger during the primary than the secondary sensitive period. We offer additional analyses on the strength of this difference in the supplemental material.

We further predicted that team leaders' promotion focus mindset positively relates to team creative performance (H3) and that their prevention focus mindset positively relates to team routine performance (H4). Multiple regression analysis confirmed that promotion-focused (T4) leaders fostered subjective team creativity ($b = .38$, $SE = .14$, $t = 2.72$, $p = .008$), and negative binomial regression analysis showed it also fostered objective team creativity ($b = .10$, $SE = .03$, $z = 2.81$, $p = .005$). By contrast, prevention focus (T4) predicted routine team performance ($b = 3.76$, $SE = 1.26$, $t = 2.99$, $p = .003$). Thus, H3 and H4 were supported.

Finally, Hypothesis 5 predicted indirect effects of project success–failure experiences for ROI T1 and ROI T3 on team outcomes T5 through regulatory focus mindsets T4 (H5a, b). Because H1 was not supported for ROI T3, we only report indirect effects of ROI T1. We entered promotion and prevention focus simultaneously to control for each other's effects. Indirect effect analysis based on bootstrapping with 10,000 samples showed that promotion focus T4 mediated the relationships between ROI T1 and subjective (indirect effect = .15, bootstrap *SE* = .10, 95% CI [.01, .39]) as well as objective team creativity (indirect effect = 1.62, bootstrap *SE* = .96, 95% CI [.13, 3.83]). Prevention focus T4 mediated the relationship between ROI T1 and routine performance (indirect effect = -2.53, bootstrap *SE* = 1.13, 95% CI [-4.62, -.36]). Thus, H5a, b was supported for ROI T1.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

Our research makes important contributions to the leader development literature and RTT. First, leader development research (e.g., DeRue & Wellman, 2009; McCauley et al., 2019) has primarily focused on developmental experiences acquired after individuals assume formal leadership roles, paying limited theoretical attention to their timing and largely overlooking another critical transition period—the early career shift from education to work that all leaders experience (cf. Day et al., 2021). Scholars have therefore called for research that compares developmental experiences across different career stages and transition periods (Akkermans et al., 2024). We identify the primary sensitive period (the transition from education to work) as a neglected yet formative stage in leader development, thus emphasizing the importance of integrating pre-leadership experiences into leader development theory and research (Liu et al., 2021). If pre-leadership experiences matter for leader development, it becomes important to examine their influence relative to the more commonly studied experiences that occur after individuals assume formal leadership roles.

(Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013)Is their effect cumulative? Do earlier experiences crowd out later ones? Or might they reinforce one another? Although RTT does not address these questions, other theoretical perspectives do. Experiential learning theories (e.g., Kolb, 2014; Sitkin, 1992) view learning as cumulative and continuous, consistent with Kolb's (1984) notion of repeated learning cycles. Yet Imprinting Theory (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) argues that experiences during sensitive transitions may leave lasting imprints that override later ones. Examining these possibilities could extend leader development theory by clarifying the relative impact of pre- versus post-leadership experiences. More broadly, our findings highlight that the timing of developmental challenges is a critical theoretical factor, as identical experiences can produce different effects depending on when they occur.

Second, we show that motivational mindsets are a crucial yet understudied aspect of leader development. Despite mindsets being recognized as important for leader effectiveness (Gottfredson & Reina, 2021), leader development scholars have primarily emphasized skill acquisition as a core outcome (for a review, see Wallace et al., 2021). Yet leaders with similar skillsets may apply them in markedly different ways depending on their mindsets (Day & Harrison, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005; Wallace et al., 2021). The literature's narrow emphasis on skills runs counter to RTT, which argues that during career transitions, motivational mindsets rather than skillsets are susceptible to external influences and primary targets of change (Nicholson, 1984). We extend prior theory and research that linked mindsets to leader effectiveness (Gottfredson & Reina, 2021; Jeanes, 2021) and to leaders' experiential learning processes (Heslin & Keating, 2017), as well as studies on the role of induced mindsets (Heslin et al., 2005; Heslin et al., 2006) by offering insights into how temporally varied work experiences resulting from developmental challenges shape leader mindsets. By showing that these mindsets predict downstream performance outcomes above and beyond skill acquisition, our findings demonstrate their developmental significance. This suggests that

leader development research should explicitly incorporate motivational mindsets as integral components of development shaped by formative work experiences across career transitions.

Finally, our findings clarify the boundary conditions of RTT by showing that not all role transitions appear equally consequential for mindset crystallization. Although the transition into a first leadership role is developmentally meaningful, it did not significantly predict leaders' regulatory focus mindsets in our data. One explanation is that early career success–failure experiences create durable motivational imprints that attenuate the influence of later transitions (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). By the time employees assume their first leadership roles, they may already possess relatively stable work experiences and cognitive models, making subsequent success–failure experiences less likely to disrupt or reshape their motivational mindsets. Thus, the developmental impact of role transitions may depend on whether it introduces sufficient novelty to unsettle previously formed orientations.

Managerial Contributions

Organizational leaders should recognize that work experiences during career transitions can profoundly shape their mindsets and, in turn, influence how they lead their teams. For instance, a leader who experiences early project success may wish to maintain a promotion focus mindset if their team's work emphasizes creativity. However, when teams are primarily responsible for following rules and norms, such a mindset may prompt unnecessary risk-taking or a failure to value routine accomplishments. To foster this awareness, leaders can be asked to recall and reflect on their first project experiences, articulating how these shaped their current leadership behaviors. Simple questioning techniques can elicit such reflections at low cost. Organizations should also design and allocate initial projects carefully. Given the long-term association between employees' first project outcomes, managers seeking to promote creativity might assign developmental rather than high-risk projects to avoid unwanted effects on prevention-focused mindsets.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

We acknowledge limitations that suggest future research avenues. First, the study design we chose does not establish causality (Shadish et al., 2002). However, experiments capable of establishing causality may face both ethical concerns and limited psychological realism. For instance, randomly assigning employees to success or failure situations would be unethical, given the hypothesis that such experiences critically shape leader development. However, future research could strengthen causal inferences by replicating our findings with longitudinal panel data. Second, we did not examine leader behaviors through which regulatory focus mindsets influence team outcomes. However, prior theory and research (e.g., Janssen et al., 2024; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007) already suggested that leader behaviors mediate the effects of regulatory focus on team outcomes, and that regulatory focus is among the strongest motivational drivers of corresponding behaviors (for reviews, see Higgins & Cornwell, 2016; Lanaj et al., 2012), (arguably) rendering such an analysis less theoretically insightful. Nonetheless, future research may confirm these mediating processes.

Third, our focus on the development of middle managers raises the question of whether findings can be extrapolated to senior leaders such as CEOs. Compared to upper-echelon leadership roles, a first team leadership role involves less seniority, responsibility, autonomy, and scope (Hambrick, 2007). Given that success-failure experiences in senior leadership positions may have broader organizational implications, their effects on leaders' mindsets and subsequent performance would be highly relevant (e.g., Shepherd, 2003). Finally, due to the limited information available in our archival records, we were unable to examine additional characteristics of success–failure experiences (e.g., visibility or strategic importance) that may shape their psychological impact. Future research could more precisely differentiate among such characteristics to better understand how distinct features of success–failure experiences influence leader mindset development and subsequent outcomes.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	.00	1.00	.42	.50										
2. Organizational Tenure	5.00	8.00	6.44	1.12	.01									
3. Openness	3.25	7.00	4.88	.82	.02	-.08	(.79)							
4. Conscientiousness	2.25	6.50	4.89	.87	-.06	.08	.26**	(.74)						
5. Extroversion	2.00	6.50	4.46	1.04	.02	-.15	.45**	.29**	(.89)					
6. Agreeableness	1.75	6.75	4.93	.86	-.07	.08	.39**	.34**	.41**	(.81)				
7. Neuroticism	1.25	7.00	3.77	1.09	-.03	-.02	-.10	-.12	-.18	-.16	(.86)			
8. Face Culture	1.00	6.50	3.23	1.06	.11	.13	.07	.02	.07	.02	.04	(.91)		
9. Year of ROI at T2	1.00	4.00	2.50	1.16	-.06	-.01	.10	-.03	-.01	-.06	-.06	.00		
10. # of Projects Experienced	6.00	13.00	8.44	1.44	-.14	.11	-.07	.02	-.07	-.19*	-.06	-.02	.09	
11. Skill Acquisition	1.00	4.00	2.57	1.03	.12	.08	-.05	-.05	-.02	.02	.09	-.03	.02	.01
12. ROI at T1	-4.12	1.26	-.23	.74	.07	-.21*	.00	.10	.01	.05	-.01	-.11	.01	-.15
13. ROI at T3	-4.15	5.72	.03	.89	.01	.18	-.12	-.05	-.05	-.04	-.09	-.14	.00	.04
14. ROI at T2	-4.01	1.19	-.19	.67	.02	-.08	-.05	.00	.04	-.02	.03	-.10	.02	.02
15. Promotion Focus Mindset at T4	1.00	6.50	4.98	1.05	.08	-.02	.19*	-.04	.05	-.08	.00	.12	.04	.01
16. Prevention Focus Mindset at T4	1.00	6.78	2.55	1.21	-.05	.01	-.02	-.04	-.03	-.03	.03	.07	-.04	-.01
17. Promotion Focus Mindset at T6	2.38	6.25	4.97	.76	-.01	-.15	.29**	-.01	.09	.05	-.05	.10	-.04	.01
18. Prevention Focus Mindset at T6	1.00	6.56	2.96	1.29	-.09	.12	-.04	.06	.02	.06	.05	.04	.00	.09
19. Subjective Team Creativity	1.00	7.00	4.02	1.38	.11	-.07	.22*	.16	.19*	.10	-.12	-.05	-.08	-.05
20. Team Routine Performance	52.00	99.00	79.90	12.57	-.03	.11	-.07	-.14	-.12	-.06	.07	.17	.00	.00
21. Objective Team Creativity	14.00	73.00	45.19	15.77	-.01	-.01	.16	.07	.31**	.03	-.15	-.15	.00	-.04

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables (continued)

Variables	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1. Gender										
2. Organizational Tenure										
3. Openness										
4. Conscientiousness										
5. Extroversion										
6. Agreeableness										
7. Neuroticism										
8. Face Culture										
9. Year of ROI at T2										
10. # of Projects Experienced										
11. Skill Acquisition										
12. ROI at T1	-.08									
13. ROI at T3	.19*	.04								
14. ROI at T2	.14	-.07	.09							
15. Promotion Focus Mindset at T4	.06	.30**	.14	-.13	(.92)					
16. Prevention Focus Mindset at T4	-.11	-.44**	-.15	.10	-.68**	(.96)				
17. Promotion Focus Mindset at T6	-.09	.22*	-.02	-.06	.66**	-.44**	(.86)			
18. Prevention Focus Mindset at T6	-.04	-.35**	-.08	.08	-.50**	.54**	-.47**	(.95)		
19. Subjective Team Creativity	.21*	.14	.18	.08	.40**	-.34**	.22*	-.21*	(.91)	
20. Team Routine Performance	-.04	.03	-.03	.03	-.28**	.32**	-.27**	.10	-.26**	
21. Objective Team Creativity	.24**	.16	.28**	.02	.39**	-.35**	.16	-.19*	.66**	-.21*

Note. $N = 117$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. All tests are two-tailed. Cronbach's Alphas are reported in the diagonal.

Table 2

Multiple Hierarchical Regression on Regulatory Focus Mindsets at Time 4

Variables	Promotion Focus Mindset at T4				Prevention Focus Mindset at T4			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
1. Gender	.10	.19	.05	.18	-.16	.23	-.05	.20
2. Organizational Tenure	-.02	.08	.01	.08	.04	.10	-.04	.09
3. Openness	.35**	.13	.38**	.12	-.04	.16	-.07	.14
4. Conscientiousness	-.02	.11	-.06	.11	-.02	.13	.06	.12
5. Extroversion	.02	.11	.03	.10	-.06	.13	-.08	.11
6. Agreeableness	-.28*	.12	-.29*	.11	.01	.14	.04	.13
7. Neuroticism	.04	.09	.05	.08	.04	.10	.03	.09
8. Face Culture	.02	.08	.05	.08	.03	.10	-.01	.09
9. Year of ROI at T2	-.01	.08	-.02	.08	-.05	.10	-.03	.09
10. # of Projects Experienced	.01	.06	.03	.06	-.03	.08	-.07	.07
11. Skill acquisition	-.13	.10	.09	.09	-.13	.11	-.14	.10
12. ROI at T2	-.13	.10	-.12	.09	.02	.11	-.02	.10
13. ROI at T1			.41**	.13			-.74***	.14
14. ROI at T3			.19	.10			-.13	.12
15. Constant	31.16	165.67	47.05	158.20	98.15	193.86	56.37	175.46
F	1.19		2.14*		.30		2.39**	
R^2	.11		.20		.03		.22	

Note. $N = 132$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. All tests are two-tailed. ROI at T1 represents prior success-failure experiences during the primary sensitive period. ROI at T2 represents a randomly selected prior project success-failure experience during the non-sensitive period. ROI at T3 represents the success-failure experience during the secondary sensitive period.

Table 3

Multiple Hierarchical Regression on Regulatory Focus Mindsets at Time 6

Variables	Promotion Focus Mindset at T6				Prevention Focus Mindset at T6			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
1. Gender	-.03	.15	-.07	.14	-.19	.26	-.10	.25
2. Organizational Tenure	-.10	.07	-.07	.07	.12	.12	.06	.12
3. Openness	.30**	.10	.32**	.10	-.12	.18	-.16	.17
4. Conscientiousness	-.06	.09	-.09	.09	.05	.16	.12	.15
5. Extroversion	-.04	.08	-.04	.08	.05	.14	.02	.14
6. Agreeableness	-.03	.10	-.03	.10	.11	.17	.13	.16
7. Neuroticism	-.03	.07	-.03	.07	.08	.12	.07	.11
8. Face Culture	.07	.07	.09	.07	.04	.12	-.01	.12
9. Year of ROI at T2	-.05	.06	-.06	.06	.00	.11	.02	.10
10. # of Projects Experienced	.02	.05	.04	.05	.07	.09	.03	.09
11. Skill acquisition	-.02	.07	-.02	.07	-.06	.12	-.08	.12
11. ROI at T2	-.05	.11	-.02	.10	.18	.19	.13	.18
12. ROI at T1			.24*	.10			-.58**	.17
13. ROI at T3			.03	.08			-.10	.14
14. Constant	109.08	123.65	120.77	121.18	-8.03	219.28	-36.58	208.30
F	1.30		1.62		.46		1.39	
R^2	.13		.18		.05		.16	

Note. $N = 117$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. All tests are two-tailed. ROI at T1 represents prior success-failure experiences during the primary sensitive period. ROI at T2 represents a randomly selected prior project success-failure experience during the non-sensitive period. ROI at T3 represents the success-failure experience during the secondary sensitive period.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model

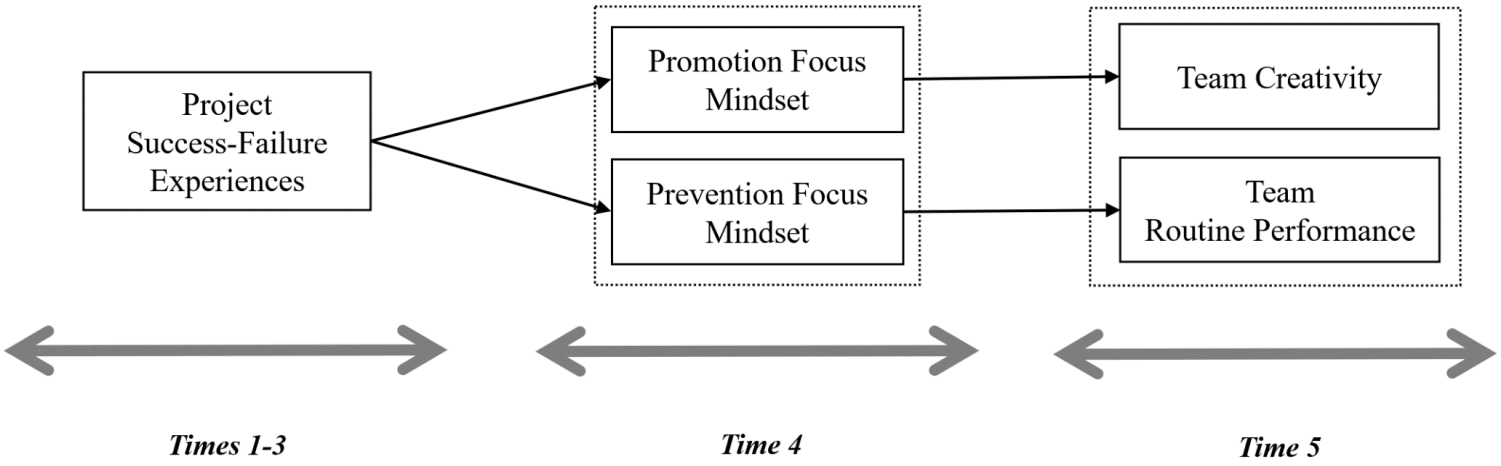


Figure 2

Visualization of Data Collection

