Leader Age and Constructive and Destructive Avoidance in Leader-
Employee Conflict: The Mediating Role of Leader Emotion Management

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Master Thesis - Work, Organizational and Personnel Psychology

S4682505
January, 2026
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Abstract

Leader-employee conflicts are structural features of organizational coordination. Consequently, the way leaders manage these conflicts is a critical element of effective leadership. While active conflict management strategies of leaders are well-studied, avoidance is often treated as a uniform option, obscuring the distinction between constructive cooling-off and destructive withdrawal. This study investigated the role of leader age in these distinct avoidance conflict management strategies, examining Emotion-Management Ability (EMA) as a mediator based on Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory. It was hypothesized that older leaders, possessing higher EMA, would engage more in constructive avoidance and less in destructive avoidance. A two-wave vignette study ($N = 316$) with leaders from UK measured age and EMA at Time 1, and avoidance responses of leaders to conflict with employees seven days later. Results indicated a significant negative association between EMA and destructive avoidance of leaders. Furthermore, higher leader age was indirectly associated with lower destructive avoidance through EMA. However, contrary to expectations, no significant associations were found for constructive avoidance. These findings suggest that while EMA effectively buffers against destructive avoidance, it does not automatically translate into constructive avoidance. The study highlights the need for a differentiated view of conflict avoidance and underscores the role of emotional competencies in leadership.

Keywords: leader-employee conflict, constructive avoidance, destructive avoidance, leader age, emotion management ability

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Interdependent work routinely produces competing goals, ambiguous roles, and resource frictions. In such settings, conflicts are not anomalies but structural features of coordination. Because leaders hold formal authority and act as local norm setters, how they manage conflict with employees shapes whether disagreements are surfaced productively or allowed to harden into chronic strain (Guttman, 2004). From a leadership perspective, conflict management is thus not a peripheral HR concern. Conflict management is a recurring judgment call that affects team functioning, psychological climate, and downstream performance processes. Leader-employee conflicts are also common and consequential: in the Netherlands, 26% of employees reported a workplace conflict in 2022 (van den Heuvel et al., 2023). Beyond prevalence, psychosocial working conditions have substantial cost implications. TNO estimates employer absenteeism costs due to psychosocial workload at €4.9 billion (2023), with "conflict or transgressive behavior" accounting for roughly €870 million (TNO, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present study makes two advances. First, it treats avoidance in leader-employee conflict as two distinct strategies, constructive and destructive, rather than a single residual option. Second, drawing on lifespan and emotion-regulation perspectives, it theorizes and tests a mediation in which leaders' chronological age relates to avoidance via Emotion-Management Ability (EMA). This differentiated view clarifies when "stepping back" preserves dialogue versus suppresses voice and identifies a practical lever for shifting avoidance from destructive to constructive forms.

Classic frameworks distinguish a small family of conflict-management strategies: problem solving (integrating), forcing (dominating), compromising, accommodating (yielding), and avoiding, which are typically organized by the dual-concern model (De Dreu

et al., 2001). Organizational research has devoted considerable attention to the more active strategies of leaders, especially problem solving and forcing (Fousiani et al., 2025). Although the literature has often treated avoidance as a residual or uniformly passive option (De Dreu et al., 2001; Beitler et al., 2018), conflict avoidance is neither uniform nor necessarily counterproductive. Current theories and findings suggest that avoidance is often purposeful and can take different forms, with varying intentions, communication channels, and consequences (Wang et al., 2012). Prior studies often examined avoidance as a single category, which obscured these contrasts and limited theory building about when and why leaders avoid constructively versus destructively (Beitler et al., 2018).

This study distinguishes two different types of avoidance in conflicts, namely constructive and destructive strategies (Wang et al., 2012): Constructive avoidance refers to temporarily changing the subject or postponing a heated exchange to allow emotions to cool, while explicitly keeping the channel open for subsequent dialogue. In contrast, destructive avoidance, also known as passive dominance, involves withdrawing from dialogue, ignoring objections, or acting unilaterally, thereby cutting off communication channels (Wang et al., 2012). Although both patterns lack overt confrontation in the moment, they differ in goal orientation (relationship maintenance vs. unilateral control) and in whether communication between involved parties remains open. Their downstream outcomes are theorized to range from de-escalation and relationship preservation to escalation and distrust (Beitler et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2012).

Leader Age and Emotion Management

A further question is what shapes EMA and, via EMA, avoidance choices in leadership. Demographic shifts in aging workforces have increased age diversity in supervisory roles, raising interest in how chronological age relates to conflict management (Fousiani et al., 2025). The socio-emotional selectivity theory (SST) offers a coherent

explanation. SST assumes that when people perceive their future as more limited, they shift their priorities. Rather than acquiring knowledge and exploring new things, they focus on emotionally meaningful goals and nurturing relationships (Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen, 2021). Consistent evidence suggests that older adults report fewer and often less intense negative emotions in everyday life. They also use cognitive reappraisal more and prioritize maintaining goodwill in interpersonal relationships (Birditt et al., 2005). In leadership contexts, researchers argue that age-related shifts in priorities and emotion processes are reflected in more collaborative and emotion-oriented interpersonal styles (Walter & Scheibe, 2013; Fousiani et al., 2025).

How might these age-graded patterns connect to avoidance choices? Two pathways are plausible and not mutually exclusive. First, if older leaders prioritize relationship maintenance, they may be more motivated to prevent escalation without burning bridges. This motive profile aligns more with constructive avoidance than with destructive avoidance (Beitler et al., 2018). Second, with age, many emotional competencies show minor but reliable improvements across adulthood, including aspects of perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions (Doerwald et al., 2016; Beitler et al., 2018). This supports the expectation that chronological age relates to higher EMA. Together, SST and lifespan perspectives suggest a distal-proximal chain: chronological age → EMA → avoidance style.

The Mediating Role of Leaders' Emotion Management

To explain how leaders arrive at different avoidance choices, we foreground Emotion-Management Ability (EMA). EMA is a performance-based capacity to select and implement responses that regulate affect in oneself and others during emotionally charged episodes (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). In organizational settings, EMA shows incremental validity in predicting task performance, organizational citizenship, and lower deviance, beyond cognitive ability and the Big Five (Kluemper et al., 2011). Applied to leader-

employee conflicts, EMA should facilitate constructive avoidance by enabling early detection of escalation cues and the deliberate initiation of a brief cooling-off pause without shutting down communication. It should also support a timely return to substantive discussion once arousal has dropped. In contrast, lower EMA may blur the distinction between pausing and disengaging, increasing the likelihood of destructive avoidance (e.g., passive dominance) that forecloses later dialogue (Beitler et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2012). In short, EMA establishes a direct psychological link between the characteristics of leaders and their avoidance style, which affects how leaders monitor, structure, and resume conflict discussions.

Treating avoidance as a single passive strategy has obscured theoretically meaningful differences. The same outward behavior (no immediate debate) can implement opposite interaction goals and communication structures. Constructive avoidance keeps dialogue channels open and is often strategic, serving supportive or cooperative purposes (e.g., time to cool down) consistent with integrative aims. Destructive avoidance (passive dominance) closes channels and tends to align with competitive task goals, instrumentality, or enmity, thereby fostering distributive tendencies (Wang et al., 2012). When leaders rely on these different forms, they send different signals about voice, psychological safety, and procedural fairness. Differentiating between constructive and destructive avoidance thus enables more precise theorizing about the role of emotional competencies, especially EMA, in leadership behavior.

Moreover, a differentiated view is consistent with reviews showing age-related increases in positive (i.e., constructive) avoidance and, in some samples, age-related tendencies toward negative (i.e., destructive) avoidance under certain conditions. This highlights the importance of modeling mechanisms and boundary conditions rather than assuming uniformly beneficial age effects (Beitler et al., 2018). In leadership settings that require both relational maintenance and task coordination, avoiding a heated exchange can

lower arousal and permit a more effective conversation. However, disengaging altogether risks allowing issues to fester and eroding trust. Only the former is conceptually consistent with EMA-enabled timing and re-engagement.

Synthesizing these strands yields a clear theoretical proposition. Chronological age serves as a distal antecedent, influencing lifespan-related motivation (SST) and skill acquisition, which are associated with higher EMA in many leaders. EMA, in turn, provides the proximal capacity to (a) detect early warning signs of escalation, (b) implement temporary disengagements that cool affect without closing the channel, and (c) re-enter the conversation at a better moment (constructive avoidance). Conversely, when EMA is lower, leaders may mistake cooling-off for withdrawal, default to unilateral action, or ignore objections, resulting in destructive avoidance. This account accords with organizational evidence that emotion-management skills predict adaptive work behaviors (Kluemper et al., 2011) and with communication research documenting that conflict strategies, including avoidance variants, map onto underlying goals and socioemotional orientations (Wang et al., 2012).

The mechanism-focused lens clarifies why similar surface acts (no open debate now) can have opposite functional meanings in leadership. When a leader says, "Let's pause and revisit after lunch," and later invites the discussion back, the move signals a relational concern and a savvy approach to regulation. When a leader goes silent, ignores objections, and proceeds unilaterally, the same pause becomes a signal of voice suppression. EMA is the differentiator: it scaffolds the timing, framing, and follow-through that distinguish constructive from destructive avoidance.

A complete model must acknowledge context. Leadership often demands active conflict engagement. In some settings, however, avoidance may postpone necessary decisions and thereby amplify costs (De Dreu et al., 2001; Fousiani et al., 2025). Additionally, the

nature of the conflict (task vs. relationship), its severity, and time pressure can all influence the appropriate response. The quality of communication between managers and employees also plays a crucial role. Age-related patterns may also differ between professional and private contexts (Beitler et al., 2018; Fousiani et al., 2025). These contingencies do not negate the proposed mechanism, but rather determine when EMA-based constructive avoidance is most likely to be chosen (e.g., when emotional arousal and non-substantive disagreements are the immediate obstacle).

Despite converging theory, two gaps limit cumulative progress. First, leadership research on conflict has primarily emphasized active strategies and often treats avoidance as a uniform, passive option. This has left the constructive-destructive distinction under-theorized in leader-employee interactions (De Dreu et al., 2001; Fousiani et al., 2025). Second, while lifespan perspectives and reviews suggest that age and emotional competencies are linked to conflict behavior, the mediating role of EMA between chronological age and leaders' specific avoidance choices has not been directly modeled in a leadership context (Beitler et al., 2018). Addressing these gaps requires (a) treating avoidance as two distinct leader responses with different intentions and outcomes, and (b) theorizing EMA as the proximal mechanism that channels age-related differences into concrete conflict behavior.

Hypotheses

H1: Leaders' chronological age is positively related to their Emotion Management Ability (EMA).

H2a: Higher EMA of the leader is positively related to the use of constructive avoidance in leader-employee conflict.

H2b: Higher EMA of the leader is negatively related to the use of destructive avoidance in leader-employee conflict.

H3 (mediation): Leader EMA mediates the relationship between leader chronological age and avoidance strategies such that higher age is associated with higher EMA, which in turn is associated with (a) greater constructive avoidance and (b) lower destructive avoidance.

Methods

Participants

The overall sample comprised 316 organizational leaders working in various organizations in the UK. Percentages reported below are based on valid responses for each item, with missing values noted per variable. The mean age of the participants was 43.70 (SD = 10.55, range 24-75 years). Of those who reported gender, 59.7% identified as male (n = 181), 39.9% as female (n = 121), and 0.3% as "otherwise defined" (n = 1). Among valid responses, 94.4% reported British nationality, 4.0% Irish, and 1.7% other. For education, 47.0% held a Bachelor's degree, 18.5% a Master's, 6.3% a Doctorate, 19.5% High School (or equivalent), 8.3% an Occupational degree, and 0.3% selected Other (n = 1). We estimated statistical power for the indirect effect (a × b) in the proposed simple mediation model (X = leader age, M = Emotion-Management Ability, Y = avoidance) using a Monte Carlo simulation implemented via the Shiny application by Schoemann et al. (2017). For the constructive avoidance outcome, the correlations entered into the simulation were: age with EMA $r = .105$, EMA with constructive avoidance $r = .043$, and age with constructive avoidance $r = -.025$ (standard deviations: age = 10.284, EMA = 0.127, constructive avoidance = 1.185). Based on these inputs, the estimated power to detect the indirect effect was 0.04. The Monte Carlo standard error for this estimate was approximately 0.006, which yields a 95% Monte Carlo precision interval ranging from 0.028 to 0.052.

For the destructive avoidance outcome, the correlations used were: age with EMA ($r = .105$), EMA with destructive avoidance ($r = -.199$), and age with destructive avoidance ($r = .073$). Using these parameters, the estimated power to detect the indirect effect was 0.43. The

Monte Carlo standard error was approximately 0.016, resulting in a 95% Monte Carlo precision interval between 0.399 and 0.461.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted online at two time points via Qualtrics. Leaders were recruited on Prolific using a manager screener and accessed an anonymized study link. After reading a GDPR-compliant information page, participants provided digital informed consent. Time 1. To separate the measurement of the independent variable (leaders' chronological age) and the mediator (Emotion-Management Ability; STEM-B) from the experimental manipulation and the measurement of the dependent variables, we collected all baseline variables in a single wave. Participants completed demographics (e.g., age, gender, leadership experience), followed by the performance-based emotion-management measure described in the Measures section. A single hidden attention check screened data quality.

Time 2 (7 days later). Exactly seven days after Wave 1, all participants who passed the attention check received an automated invitation to the follow-up survey. The Prolific ID was used solely for re-contact and was removed from analysis files before archiving. In Time 2, participants read a set of conflict vignettes presented in random order and then reported their conflict-avoidance responses (see Measures for instruments and scoring). We set the interval to seven days to create temporal and psychological separation between predictors/mediator (assessed at Time 1) and the vignette-based outcomes (assessed at Time 2), thereby reducing same-source/same-time common-method variance, limiting short-term affect carryover or consistency motifs, and balancing separation against panel attrition (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Debriefing, incentives, and ethics. Upon completion, participants received a debriefing that explained the study's purpose and provided the researcher's contact details. Compensation was £1.50 per wave (£3.00 total), released upon completion of both waves. The study received prior approval from the faculty ethics committee. Raw data were stored in

a password-protected Qualtrics account, accessible only to the research team, and then transferred to an encrypted university server for 10-year retention in line with the data-management plan.

Design

We employed an experimental-vignette design. Age was the main predictor, and Emotion-Management Ability (EMA) was the mediator, both assessed at Time 1.

At Time 2, each participant read two leader-employee conflict scenarios adapted from the established conflict-type framework and purpose-written to depict relationship conflict, that is, interpersonal tension, personality/value clashes, and perceived slights between the leader and the employee, a form of conflict commonly regarded as more detrimental than task conflict. Before each vignette, participants were instructed to adopt the role of the leader, imagine the situation as if occurring in their own team, and indicate how they would respond. After each vignette, manipulation checks assessed whether the scenario was perceived as relationship- versus task-focused. To minimize order effects, vignettes were presented in random order.

After each of these two vignettes, participants reported their constructive avoidance and destructive avoidance responses. Full vignette wording is provided in Appendix A.

Measures

Leader Age (T1). Leader age was measured in years.

Emotion-Management Ability (EMA) (T1).

Leader EMA was measured with the Situational Test of Emotional Management - Brief (STEM-B; MacCann & Roberts, 2008). The test consists of 18 emotionally charged scenarios (e.g., conflict, criticism, loss), each followed by four possible ways of responding. Participants rate how effective each response would be for managing emotions, and responses are scored against expert consensus ratings. Following the coding procedure outlined in Allen

et al., (2015), the optimal response was coded as 1, and all others were coded as 0. A mean score was then calculated, with higher values indicating greater emotion-regulation knowledge. A sample item describes receiving unjustified criticism from a colleague and evaluating how effectively different reactions (e.g., defending oneself calmly vs. ignoring the comment) would manage the situation. In the present sample, internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's α = .66).

Constructive and Destructive Avoidance of the Leader (T2)

Conflict-avoidant behaviour was measured with the Constructive and Destructive Avoiding Strategy Scale (Wang et al., 2012). After each relationship-conflict vignette, leaders rated eight statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*). Four items form the constructive avoidance subscale (e.g., "If the argument became too heated, I would try to switch the topic"), capturing a temporary shift of dialogue to cool emotions. The remaining four items measure destructive avoidance, or passive dominance (e.g., "I would stop arguing with my employee and start doing what I want"), characterised by breaking off communication and acting unilaterally.

To obtain stable person-level indices and reflect leaders' consistent tendencies across scenarios, we created one composite per subscale by averaging the corresponding items across the two relationship-conflict vignettes (i.e., item responses were pooled across RV1 and RV2 and then averaged per subscale). This aggregation was empirically justified: the same subscale measured after Vignette 1 versus Vignette 2 was strongly and positively correlated (destructive avoidance: $r = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$; constructive avoidance: $r = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$; N = 251), indicating cross-scenario consistency. Higher values indicate a stronger tendency toward the respective strategy. Internal consistencies were α = .82 for constructive and α = .82 for destructive avoidance.

Manipulation checks

To verify that each vignette instantiated the intended conflict type, participants completed brief manipulation check ratings immediately after every scenario. On a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a lot*), participants indicated the extent to which the disagreement was about the work/task (e.g., "To what extent is this situation about the task(s) that need to be completed?") and about interpersonal/relationship issues (e.g., "To what extent is this situation about the personal relationship between you and your employee?"). These checks were used solely to validate that the focal scenarios were perceived as relationship conflicts, and they did not enter the outcome composites. The outcome scores for constructive and destructive avoidance described above were computed from responses to the two relationship conflict vignettes only.

Controlling for Gender

Gender was included as a covariate because research repeatedly reports gender differences in both EMA and preferred conflict-handling styles. More specifically, meta-analyses show that women use emotion-focused regulation strategies more often than men (Tamres et al., 2002) and score higher on adaptive emotion-regulation scales (Garnefski et al., 2003). In conflict settings, female leaders tend to prefer non-competitive strategies such as avoidance or compromise, whereas male leaders more frequently adopt dominant approaches (Rahim & Katz, 2019). To prevent these gender-related preferences from biasing the relations among age, EMA, and avoidance styles, gender was entered as a control variable in all mediation analyses (dummy-coded: 0 = female, 1 = male; responses of "other" were treated as missing due to the small cell size). Gender was assessed at T1, along with the other demographics.

Results

To test our hypotheses, we ran two separate simple mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro (model 4; Hayes, 2013). In both analyses, leader age was entered as the

independent variable, and EMA was entered as the mediator. Gender was included as a covariate (0 = female, 1 = male). In the first mediation analysis, constructive avoidance served as the dependent variable. In the second mediation analysis, destructive avoidance served as the dependent variable. Indirect paths (a × b) were estimated using bootstrapped confidence intervals. A direct path was interpreted as statistically significant when the 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero. Because the specified models did not include interaction terms, the continuous variables (leader age and EMA) were entered in their original metric (i.e., not mean-centered). Given the two-wave, non-experimental design, these direct and indirect paths are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal relationships.

Constructive Avoidance

The outcome model accounted for a small, non-significant share of variance in constructive avoidance, $R^2 = .02$, $F(3, 235) = 1.58$, $p = .20$. In the mediator model, age was positively associated with EMA but narrowly missed conventional significance, $b = 0.0015$, $SE = 0.0008$, $t = 1.96$, $p = .051$. The mediator model as a whole was significant, $R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 236) = 3.56$, $p = .03$.

EMA was not significantly associated with constructive avoidance, $b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.63$, $t = 0.48$, $p = .63$, 95% CI [-0.94, 1.54]. The direct association between age and constructive avoidance was also not significant, $b = -0.0035$, $SE = 0.0074$, $t = -0.47$, $p = .64$. The indirect association between age and constructive avoidance via EMA was not statistically significant, $ab = 0.0004$, $BootSE = 0.0010$, 95% bootstrap CI [-0.0016, 0.0027]. Gender was a significant covariate, with men reporting lower constructive avoidance than women, $b = -0.3178$, $SE = 0.1578$, $t = -2.01$, $p = .045$. Therefore, H1, H2a, and H3a were not supported at $\alpha = .05$.

Destructive Avoidance

For destructive avoidance, the outcome model was significant, $R^2 = .05$, $F(3, 235) = 4.08$, $p = .007$. The age - EMA association replicated the trend-level pattern, $b = 0.0015$, SE = 0.0008, $t = 1.96$, $p = .051$, and the mediator model again reached significance, $R^2 = .03$, $F(2, 236) = 3.56$, $p = .03$.

EMA was negatively associated with destructive avoidance, $b = -2.12$, SE = 0.67, $t = -3.15$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [-3.44, -0.79]. The direct association between age and destructive avoidance was not significant, $b = 0.01$, SE = 0.01, $t = 1.31$, $p = .19$. The indirect association via EMA was significant and negative, $ab = -0.0031$, BootSE = 0.0018, 95% bootstrap CI [-0.0071, -0.0001]. Gender was not significant in this model, $b = 0.14$, SE = 0.17, $t = 0.84$, $p = .40$. Taken together, these results did not support H1 at $\alpha = .05$ but supported H2b and H3b.

Discussion

This study examined whether leaders' chronological age is associated with two forms of conflict avoidance, namely constructive and destructive avoidance, through leaders' Emotion-Management Ability (EMA). Results were not uniform across outcomes. EMA was significantly and negatively associated with destructive avoidance, and the bootstrapped indirect path from age to destructive avoidance via EMA was small but statistically significant. By contrast, EMA was not significantly associated with constructive avoidance, and the corresponding indirect path was not statistically significant. The age → EMA association itself was small and only marginal in this sample. Gender was related to constructive avoidance only (men reported lower constructive avoidance than women).

Because this design is non-experimental, these paths are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal effects. Taken together, the findings reinforce the value of distinguishing constructive from destructive avoidance (Wang et al., 2012) and suggest that EMA may be particularly relevant for reducing leaders' tendency to disengage in ways that close down dialogue.

Viewed through the framework developed in the introduction, where chronological age is treated as a distal characteristic that can relate to socioemotional motivation and emotion-related competencies (Carstensen, 1992; Walter & Scheibe, 2013), EMA is conceptualized as an ability-based emotion-regulation capacity (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer et al., 2016), and avoidance is differentiated into constructive and destructive forms (Wang et al., 2012).

The present pattern suggests that EMA is most relevant for destructive avoidance. Specifically, higher EMA was associated with lower self-reported likelihood of behaviors that shut down dialogue, such as disengaging, ignoring objections, or acting unilaterally (Wang et al., 2012). In contrast, EMA was not significantly associated with constructive avoidance in this sample. Given the very low sensitivity for the constructive indirect path and the modest reliability of the brief EMA measure, this null association should be interpreted cautiously; it may reflect small true effects that the study was underpowered to detect and/or the possibility that constructive avoidance depends more strongly on conflict goals, norms, and situational demands than on EMA alone (De Dreu et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2012). More generally, the small, trend-level age → EMA association and the small indirect path caution against broad claims that "age itself" improves conflict handling. Instead, the data are most consistent with age being related to destructive avoidance only to the extent that it is linked to slightly higher EMA. From a practical standpoint, EMA is also a more actionable target than chronological age because it can be assessed and potentially developed (Kluemper et al., 2011; Doerwald et al., 2016). Overall, this interpretation is consistent with positioning EMA as a proximal bridge from distal leader characteristics to moment-to-moment conflict behavior.

Two design features help explain why evidence emerged more strongly for destructive than constructive avoidance. First, statistical power for the constructive indirect path was very low, while power for the destructive indirect path was modest; under such conditions,

small constructive effects could go undetected. Second, EMA was measured with a brief performance-based instrument that showed modest internal consistency in this sample, which would attenuate its associations with both outcomes.

Finally, the study targeted relationship conflicts using vignette scenarios; constructive avoidance may be more strongly expressed in task conflicts that require a scheduled cool-down and planned reconvening, whereas destructive avoidance may be the default when arousal spikes in interpersonal friction. These considerations do not overturn the primary conclusions, but they situate the present asymmetry in plausible design- and context-related constraints.

The gender pattern was confined to constructive avoidance. Men reported slightly lower constructive avoidance than women, and this difference should be interpreted cautiously as exploratory. Controlling for gender was motivated by prior evidence that men and women differ, on average, in emotion regulation preferences and coping strategies (Tamres et al., 2002; Garnefski et al., 2003) and in conflict management tendencies (Rahim & Katz, 2019). However, gender was not related to destructive avoidance in this sample. Future work could test when gender-related preferences translate into distinct avoidance choices under different conflict demands and leadership contexts.

Limitations and further directions

The two-wave design with a seven-day lag helps reduce same-time common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), but it does not permit strong causal conclusions. Unmeasured third variables could plausibly relate to both EMA and avoidance choices. For example, stable interpersonal orientations and conflict goal preferences may shape how leaders interpret and respond to disagreement (De Dreu et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2012). Age-related motivational shifts, such as generativity, may also influence leaders' conflict responses and could covary with EMA (Fousiani et al., 2025; Walter & Scheibe, 2013). Finally, contextual

features such as team norms and conflict climate may encourage voice or, conversely, foster withdrawal, thereby affecting both emotion-management demands and avoidance tendencies (Beitler et al., 2018; De Dreu et al., 2001). As indicated by the power analysis reported in the Methods, sensitivity was very low for the constructive indirect path and only modest for the destructive indirect path. Future work should strengthen both causal leverage and statistical power, for instance, by using higher-powered multi-study designs and/or longitudinal approaches (e.g., repeated measures and cross-lagged panel models) that disentangle within-person fluctuations from between-person differences.

Measurement choices also limit precision. The STEM-B performance test used to assess EMA exhibited modest reliability in this sample, which likely attenuated the paths linking EMA to behavior. A richer EMA battery could improve reliability and capture a broader range of emotion-management skills. This could include long-form performance tests, situational judgment items keyed to leadership, or general-factor scoring. The avoidance outcomes were self-reports following vignettes rather than observed behavior in live exchanges. Subsequent studies could triangulate with behavioral observations, event-based sampling of real conflict episodes, peer or employee rating, or laboratory interactions that enable coding of actual "pause-and-return" dynamics.

Generalizability is circumscribed by the sampling frame. Participants were UK-based leaders recruited online; sectoral mix, hierarchical level, and organizational culture were heterogeneous but not systematically modeled. Cross-cultural and multi-industry replications, including field samples nested within organizations, would help identify boundary conditions. The present focus on relationship conflicts should be complemented by designs that orthogonally vary conflict type (task vs. relationship), severity, and time pressure to test whether EMA is especially consequential when the obstacle to progress is heightened arousal rather than substantive disagreement (De Dreu et al., 2001; Beitler et al., 2018). Potential

moderators derived from the theoretical framing offer tractable next tests of when EMA is most likely to redirect avoidance from destructive toward constructive forms. For example, leaders' generativity motives may strengthen the tendency to regulate emotions in the service of maintaining relationships and engaging more adaptively in conflict (Fousiani et al., 2025). Contextual conditions such as conflict goals, norms around voice, and time pressure may also shape whether a temporary postponement is used strategically (constructive avoidance) or whether withdrawal becomes a default (destructive avoidance) (De Dreu et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2012). Finally, the present model was deliberately focused on a single proposed mechanism (EMA) linking age to avoidance, and it does not capture all plausible psychological or contextual processes that can shape leaders' conflict behavior. Future work could test additional mediators (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, perspective-taking, prosocial motivation) and contextual levers (e.g., conflict norms or meeting structures) alongside EMA. Experimental and intervention studies that train EMA or implement structured "pause-and-return" routines would be particularly useful for strengthening causal inference about the proposed mechanism.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings support treating avoidance as two distinct strategies rather than an undifferentiated "avoidance" category (Wang et al., 2012). Although both strategies involve not confronting immediately, they differ in their communicative function: constructive avoidance involves temporarily changing the subject or postponing the exchange while explicitly keeping the channel open for later discussion, or proceeding unilaterally, thereby closing the channel (Wang et al., 2012). Within this framework, the present results suggest that EMA is primarily relevant for curbing destructive avoidance. This aligns with ability-based emotional intelligence theory, which conceptualizes EMA as the capacity to select effective emotion-management responses in oneself and others (Mayer & Salovey,

1997; Mayer et al., 2016), and with organizational evidence linking EMA to adaptive work behavior (Kluemper et al., 2011). The age findings are nuanced: chronological age showed no direct association with avoidance, but a small indirect association with destructive avoidance emerged through EMA, consistent with lifespan perspectives that link age to changes in socioemotional goals and emotion-related competencies (Carstensen, 1992; Doerwald et al., 2016; Walter & Scheibe, 2013). Taken together, this mechanism-first account suggests that age may matter in leader-employee conflict insofar as it relates to EMA, while the proximal lever for theory and practice is leaders' emotion-management ability rather than age per se.

Practically, the results caution against relying on tenure or age as proxies for conflict competence and instead highlight EMA as a potentially actionable target. Organizations can use performance-based emotion-management measures to diagnose gaps (MacCann & Roberts, 2008; Allen et al., 2015) and provide development that rehearses early cue detection, de-escalation moves, and explicit re-entry into dialogue. Team routines may help translate EMA into practice, for example, brief, bounded cool-downs paired with a scheduled reconvene and "pause-and-return" language that separates cooling from withdrawing (Wang et al., 2012). Coaching can target high-risk contexts such as tight deadlines, high stakes, and interpersonal friction. Selection and feedback processes can emphasize demonstrable EMA rather than demographic proxies and monitor patterns of destructive avoidance as a climate-relevant behavior. Because the EMA-destructive avoidance association was robust while constructive paths were non-significant in this study, intervention evaluation might prioritize reducing destructive withdrawal first, with constructive avoidance routines layered in as complementary practices.

In sum, the study advances a differentiated account of avoidance in leader-employee conflict (Wang et al., 2012) and identifies EMA as a plausible proximal mechanism associated with lower destructive avoidance. Chronological age showed a small, indirect

association with destructive avoidance via EMA, whereas associations with constructive avoidance were not statistically significant in this sample. Given that age is not modifiable and the age-EMA association was small, a practical implication is to focus on assessing and developing EMA rather than using age or tenure as proxies for conflict competence (Kluemper et al., 2011; Doerwald et al., 2016). Future studies that use stronger causal designs, improved EMA measurement, and broader contexts (e.g., different conflict types and organizational settings) can clarify when emotion-management ability supports a pause-and-return approach that preserves voice rather than sliding into destructive withdrawal.

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<div align="center">**Appendix A**</div>

Time 2 conflict vignettes

In the following section, you will be presented with various workplace scenarios involving a disagreement or conflict between you, in the role of a leader, and a subordinate employee. These scenarios reflect real-world challenges that leaders often face in managing teams or individual employees.

Before reading each scenario, we ask that you take a few moments to fully adopt the mindset of a leader. Imagine yourself supervising the employee involved, considering the dynamics of your working relationship, the context of the conflict, and the possible impact of your response.

After each scenario, you will be asked a series of questions about how you, as the leader, would approach the conflict at hand. There are no right or wrong answers—our goal is to understand how you as a leader would address different kinds of conflicts with employees.

Relationship Conflict Vignettes

Topic 1:

You are currently interacting with a subordinate employee. Your employee's attitude makes you feel uncomfortable and tense. You realize that both you and your employee get annoyed...

Topic 2:

You are in a meeting with your subordinate employee, and you notice that there is a lot of friction between the two of you. It is clear that your personalities differ markedly, and this produces considerable conflict...

Topic 3:

You are in a meeting with your employee. During your meeting, a personal issue emerges between the two of you, causing friction. Everything that you or your employee say or do feels like a personal attack to each other...

Topic 4:

You are currently working with your employee. In doing so, you notice how your employee's personality and values differ from yours. These differences cause personal issues between the two of you and are about to undermine your collaboration...

Task conflict vignettes (alternative versions used in the broader study materials)

Topic 1:

You are currently interacting with a subordinate employee. Your employee proposes an idea that deviates from what you had in mind. You realize that you and your employee have different approaches on how to do things...

Topic 2:

You are in a meeting with your subordinate employee, and you notice that there are many conflicts about ideas between the two of you. It is clear that your opinions regarding the work being done differ markedly, and this produces considerable conflict...

Topic 3:

You are in a meeting with your employee. During your meeting, your employee shares ideas that differ from yours on how to complete the task at hand. This leads to an extended debate where each of you provides counterarguments to the other…

Topic 4:

You are currently working with your employee. In doing so, you realize that you and your employee have differing opinions on how this task should be done. These differences are about to cause a delay in task progress...

Appendix B

Time 1 measures (before the vignettes)

Cooperative orientation (from the Goal interdependence scale; (Yeung et al., 2015)

(1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?

In my interactions with the employees that I supervise...

- I pass on important information to my subordinates
- I show much concern for what my subordinates want to accomplish
- I help my subordinates find ways to achieve their objectives
- My subordinates learn a lot from working together with me
- I am pleased when my subordinates succeed
- I share my ideas and resources with my subordinates
- I help my subordinates do a good job

Conflict goals (Wang et al., 2012)

(1= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

Leaders often interact differently with each of their subordinate employees. At times, these relationships may involve disagreements, tensions, or conflicts. With the following questions, we would like to understand the nature of the relationships you generally experience with your employees, especially when experiencing conflicts or having disagreements with them.

Try to reflect on the overall patterns in these relationships and rate the following statements…

When I experience a conflict or have a disagreement with my employees, usually …

Enmity goals

- I don't mind hurting my employees' feelings.
- I don't need to worry whether my words would humiliate my employees.
- I want to make my employees feel inferior.
- I do not care if my employees would feel upset because of my words.

Support goals

- I truly care about how my employees feel.
- I am careful not to hurt my employees' feelings.

- It is important for me to let my employees feel affection and care.
- It is important for me to protect my employees' feelings.

Task goals

- I feel that I need to defend my position on the issue at hand.
- I think of ways to realize my plan.
- It is important for me that my employees submit to my ideas.
- I plan on how we can work according to my ideas.

Utility goals

- It is important for me to avoid words or actions that might make our communication break down because I need to work with my employees again.
- I aim to keep good communication with my employees because we have to work together.
- I aim to keep the communication going for the sake of future work with my employees.
- I try to be careful with my word choice because I need to work with my employees again in the future.

Power construal (De Wit et al., 2017)

(1 = strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree)

Think about the power that you have by being a supervisor. Then indicate to what extent you agree with the statements listed below.

In my work, I tend to see my power in terms of…

- The *opportunity* that it gives me to tell my employees what to do without having to ask for their opinion (for example, tell them what to do).
- The *responsibilities* it gives me towards my employees.
- The *opportunities* it gives me to make my own decisions without having to think about my employees' desires or needs.
- The *obligations* it gives me towards my employees (e.g., take care of things that need to be done).
- The *opportunity* it gives me to achieve goals that I find important for myself.
- The *responsibilities* to ensure that important goals of my employees are met.

Leader generativity (Zacher et al., 2011)

(1= does not apply at all, 7 = applies completely).

Please indicate the extent to which each of the following statements applies to you in your supervisory function.

- I devote more energy to building up the next generation of employees than to getting ahead myself.

- I am more strongly concerned with establishing successful successors in my field than with working on my own success.
- I use more time for developing young employees than for making progress in my own career.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX; Liden & Maslyn, 1998)

(1= totally disagree, 7= totally agree)

With the following questions, we would like to ask you about the kind of relationships you experience in general with your subordinate employees. Try to think of the type of relationships that you experience with your employees overall (e.g., as a general pattern) and answer the following questions…

I would say that in general…

- I like my employees very much.
- I would like to have some of my employees as friends.
- My employees are a lot of fun to work with.
- My employees would defend my work actions to a superior, even without complete knowledge of the issue in question.
- My employees would come to my defence if I were "attacked" by others.
- My employees would defend me to others in the organization if I made an honest mistake.
- I offer to do work for my employees that goes beyond my role.
- I am willing to apply extra efforts for my subordinate employees, beyond those normally required.
- I am impressed with my employees' knowledge of their job.
- I respect my employees' knowledge and competence on the job.
- I admire my employees' professional skills.

Fixed-pie perception (Liu et al., 2012)

(1= not at all, 7 = to a great extent)

When you have conflicts or disagreements with your employees...

- To what extent do you feel that your employees' interests or desires are directly opposite to your own?
- To what extent do you feel that your interests or desires are compatible (=aligned or similar) to those of your employees?

Situational Test for Emotional Management – Brief (STEM-B; MacCann & Roberts, 2008)

In the following task, you will be presented with a few brief details about emotional situations, and asked to choose from four responses the most effective course of action to manage both the emotions the person is feeling and the problems they face in that situation.

Although more than one course of action might be acceptable, you are asked to choose what you think the most effective response for that person in that situation would be.

Remember, you are not necessarily choosing what you would do, or the nicest thing to do, but choosing the most effective response for that situation.

1. Wai-Hin and Connie have shared an office for years but Wai-Hin gets a new job and Connie loses contact with her. What action would be the most effective for Connie?
(a) Just accept that she is gone and the friendship is over.
(b) Ring Wai-Hin and ask her out for lunch or coffee to catch up.
(c) Contact Wai-Hin and arrange to catch up but also make friends with her replacement.
(d) Spend time getting to know the other people in the office, and strike up new friendships.

2. Manual is only a few years from retirement when he finds out his position will no longer exist, although he will still have a job with a less prestigious role. What action would be the most effective for Manual?
(a) Carefully consider his options and discuss it with his family.
(b) Talk to his boss or the management about it.
(c) Accept the situation, but still feel bitter about it.
(d) Walk out of that job.

3. Surbhi starts a new job where he doesn't know anyone and finds that no one is particularly friendly. What action would be the most effective for Surbhi?
(a) Have fun with his friends outside of work hours.
(b) Concentrate on doing his work well at the new job.
(c) Make an effort to talk to people and be friendly himself.
(d) Leave the job and find one with a better environment.

4. Andre moves away from the city his friends and family are in. He finds his friends make less effort to keep in contact than he thought they would. What action would be the most effective for Andre?
(a) Try to adjust to life in the new city by joining clubs and activities there.
(b) He should make the effort to contact them, but also try to meet people in his new city.
(c) Let go of his old friends, who have shown themselves to be unreliable.
(d) Tell his friends he is disappointed in them for not contacting him.

5. Clayton has been overseas for a long time and returns to visit his family. So much has changed that Clayton feels left out. What action would be the most effective for Clayton?
(a) Nothing – it will sort itself out soon enough.
(b) Tell his family he feels left out.
(c) Spend time listening and getting involved again.
(d) Reflect that relationships can change with time.

6. Daniel has been accepted for a prestigious position in a different country from his family, who he is close to. He and his wife decide it is worth relocating. What action would be the most effective for Daniel?
(a) Realize he shouldn't have applied for the job if he didn't want to leave.
(b) Set up a system for staying in touch, like weekly phone calls or emails.
(c) Think about the great opportunities this change offers.

(d) Don't take the position.

7. Mei Ling answers the phone and hears that close relatives are in hospital critically ill. What action would be the most effective for Mei Ling?
(a) Let herself cry and express emotion for as long as she feels like.
(b) Speak to other family to calm herself and find out what is happening, then visit the hospital.
(c) There is nothing she can do.
(d) Visit the hospital and ask staff about their condition.

8. Shona has not spoken to her nephew for months, whereas when he was younger they were very close. She rings him but he can only talk for five minutes. What action would be the most effective for Shona?
(a) Realize that he is growing up and might not want to spend so much time with his family any more.
(b) Make plans to drop by and visit him in person and have a good chat.
(c) Understand that relationships change, but keep calling him from time to time.
(d) Be upset about it, but realize there is nothing she can do.

9. Mina and her sister-in-law normally get along quite well, and the sister-in-law regularly baby-sits for her for a small fee. Lately she has also been cleaning away cobwebs, commenting on the mess, which Mina finds insulting. What action would be the most effective for Mina?
(a) Tell her sister-in-law these comments upset her.
(b) Get a new babysitter.
(c) Be grateful her house is being cleaned for free.
(d) Tell her only to baby-sit, not to clean.

10. Juno is fairly sure his company is going down and his job is under threat. It is a large company and nothing official has been said. What action would be the most effective for Juno?
(a) Find out what is happening and discuss his concerns with his family.
(b) Try to keep the company afloat by working harder.
(c) Start applying for other jobs.
(d) Think of these events as an opportunity for a new start.

11. Mallory moves from a small company to a very large one, where there is little personal contact, which she misses. What action would be the most effective for Mallory?
(a) Talk to her workmates, try to create social contacts and make friends.
(b) Start looking for a new job so she can leave that environment.
(c) Just give it time, and things will be okay.
(d) Concentrate on her outside-work friends and colleagues from previous jobs.

12. A demanding client takes up a lot of Jill's time and then asks to speak to Jill's boss about her performance. Although Jill's boss assures her that her performance is fine, Jill feels upset. What action would be the most effective for Jill?
(a) Talk to her friends or workmates about it.
(b) Ignore the incident and move on to her next task.
(c) Calm down by taking deep breaths or going for a short walk.

(d) Think that she has been successful in the past and this client being difficult is not her fault.

13. Blair and Flynn usually go to a cafe after the working week and chat about what's going on in the company. After Blair's job is moved to a different section in the company, he stops coming to the cafe. Flynn misses these Friday talks. What action would be the most effective for Flynn?
(a) Go to the cafe or socialize with other workers.
(b) Don't worry about it, ignore the changes and let Blair be.
(c) Not talk to Blair again.
(d) Invite Blair again, maybe rescheduling for another time.

14. Michelle's friend Dara is moving overseas to live with her partner. They have been good friends for many years and Dara is unlikely to come back. What action would be the most effective for Michelle?
(a) Forget about Dara.
(b) Spend time with other friends, keeping herself busy.
(c) Think that Dara and her partner will return soon.
(d) Make sure she keeps in contact through email, phone or letter writing.

15. Hannah's access to essential resources has been delayed and her work is way behind schedule. Her progress report makes no mention of the lack of resources. What action would be the most effective for Hannah?
(a) Explain the lack of resources to her boss or to management.
(b) Learn that she should plan ahead for next time.
(c) Document the lack of resources in her progress report.
(d) Don't worry about it.

16. Reece's friend points out that her young children seem to be developing more quickly than Reece's. Reece sees that this is true. What action would be the most effective for Reece?
(a) Talk the issue over with another friend.
(b) Angrily confront her friend about making such statements.
(c) Realize that children develop at different rates.
(d) Talk to a doctor about what the normal rates of development are.

17. Jumah has been working at a new job part-time while he studies. His shift times for the week are changed at the last minute, without consulting him. What action would be the most effective for Jumah?
(a) Refuse to work the new shifts.
(b) Find out if there is some reasonable explanation for the shift changes.
(c) Tell the manager in charge of shifts that he is not happy about it.
(d) Grumpily accept the changes and do the shifts.

18. Julie hasn't seen Ka for ages and looks forward to their weekend trip away. However, Ka has changed a lot and Julie finds that she is no longer an interesting companion. What action would be the most effective for Julie?
(a) Cancel the trip and go home.
(b) Realize that it is time to give up the friendship and move on.
(c) Understand that people change, so move on, but remember the good times.

(d) Concentrate on her other, more rewarding friendships.

Appendix C

Measures following each vignette (Time 2)

Conflict management strategies (distractor items; De Dreu et al., 2001)

How would you approach this specific disagreement/conflict with your employee?

(1= not at all, 7= to a great extent)

Forcing
I would push my own point of view.

Problem-solving
I would examine ideas from both sides to find a mutually optimal solution.

Constructive and destructive avoidance strategy scale (Wang et al., 2012)

Constructive avoiding (pretending)

I would pretend nothing is wrong by talking about something else.
If the argument became too heated, I would try to switch the topic.
I would stop arguing with my employee and suggest we say or do something else.
I would try to keep the communication going by reframing or shifting the topic.

Destructive avoiding (passive domination)

I would stop arguing with my employee and start doing what I want.
I would focus on doing what I want and would not argue back.
I would "play deaf" and stop listening to my employee.
I would not argue with my employee and start to do what I want.

Fixed-pie perception (Liu et al., 2012)

(1= not at all, 7 = to a great extent)

To what extent would you feel that your employees' interests or desires are directly opposite to your own?

Manipulation checks

(1 = not at all, 7= a lot)

To what extent is this situation about the personal relationship between you and your employee?
To what extent is this situation about the task(s) that need to be completed?

Control

(1 = not at all, 7= a lot)

How serious is this conflict in your opinion?

Appendix D

Debriefing text

Thank you very much for your participation in this study. Please remember that your individual responses are anonymous and confidential.

Explanation of the Study

Prior literature has pointed out the role of leader's age in their tendency to engage in conflicts with their employees. Yet findings on the effects of demographic characteristics on conflicts are largely mixed.

In this study, we assume that the older age of a leader determines engagement in conflicts and conflict management strategies on the part of supervisors. We additionally search for possible variables that explain these results. We hypothesize that older leaders, especially when confronted with task conflicts with their employees, use less avoiding strategies. In other words, they do not avoid conflicts that focus on specific problems or issues that require their attention. In contrast, they tend to avoid conflicts that are emotional and thus relationship oriented. They do so because they see avoiding as an effective way to de-escalate emotional/relationship conflicts.

In case you felt uncomfortable at any point during the completion of the questionnaire, we would like to point out that you should not generalize salient negative feelings throughout this study to other aspects of your life or beliefs.

Contact Information

The experiment is being conducted by Dr. Kyriaki Fousiani at Groningen University (k.fousiani@rug.nl).
If you have further questions, comments or are interested in the results of the study, you are welcome to contact us by email.

Thank you again for your participation in this study!

Appendix E

I acknowledge the use of https://www.deepl.com/en/translator used to translate from German to English. I acknowledge the use of https://www.grammarly.com to correct my grammar.