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Leader Regulatory Goal Setting and Employee Creativity

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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that leaders can influence employee creativity by shaping their followers' regulatory focus (promotion or prevention). We propose that this work has overlooked the nature of the regulatory goals (maximal or minimal) that leaders set for their followers. We performed two studies to test this: a vignette-based experiment with 297 participants and a time-lagged, multisource field survey involving 335 leader-employee pairs across various Dutch organizations. Across the two studies, findings reveal that leaders who set maximal goals—emphasizing gains, advancement, and aspirations—significantly enhance their followers' creativity by boosting their promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity. However, leaders who set minimal goals—emphasizing loss avoidance, security, and duty fulfillment—tend to suppress creativity among their followers due to an increased prevention focus and a propensity to conform to the leader's directives. Our novel concept of leader regulatory goal setting demonstrates incremental predictive validity beyond the effects of conventional transformational and transactional leadership styles. Our findings enrich the comprehension of the motivational interplay in leader-follower exchanges and their creative consequences. Furthermore, this research offers valuable strategies for crafting leadership interventions that effectively stimulate employee creativity.

Leadership has long been recognized as a pivotal factor in fostering employee creativity, defined as the generation of new and useful ideas across various organizational aspects (e.g., Amabile et al. 1996; Atwater and Carmeli 2009; Mumford et al. 2002; Reiter-Palmon and Illies 2004). Rooted in Higgins' regulatory focus theory (1997), a dominant paradigm in this field assumes that leadership styles shape creativity by steering employees toward either a promotion focus (emphasizing gains, advancement, and ideals) or a prevention focus (emphasizing non-losses, security, and oughts). Kark and Van Dijk's (2007) conceptual framework, focusing on transformational and transactional leadership (Avolio and Bass 1991), has laid the foundation of this paradigm. They posit that transformational leaders act as catalysts for change and growth, inducing a promotion focus in followers and thereby enhancing creativity. In contrast, transactional leaders utilize rewards and punishments to motivate and direct followers to fulfill roles and achieve goals, fostering a prevention focus that potentially curtails creativity. This framework has been extended to other leadership styles – ambidextrous, servant, authentic, transgressive, and supportive – which also influence creativity through regulatory focus mechanisms (e.g., Neubert et al. 2008; Shang et al. 2019; Tung 2016; Tung and Yu 2016; Wu et al. 2008). Central to this research is the notion that employees perceive leadership "as an organizational endorsement of promotion-focused or prevention-focused concerns and that this perception will influence employee behavior by eliciting a congruent state of regulatory focus" (Wu et al. 2008, 587).

However, this body of literature presents a serious conceptual shortcoming: It fails to consider the specific regulatory goals set by leaders, which are crucial to both leadership and

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regulatory focus theories. Higgins (1997, 1998) identifies these goals as either maximal, promoting gains and ideals, or minimal, emphasizing security and duties. The current literature does not clearly and sufficiently distinguish the specific regulatory goals set and endorsed by different leadership styles, leading to an oversimplification of the relationships between leadership, regulatory focus, and creativity. For instance, while a transformational leader may foster a promotion focus in followers by setting and endorsing maximal goals for change and growth, they could also induce a prevention focus by emphasizing minimal goals that prioritize a safe work environment (e.g., Barling, Loughlin, and Kelloway 2002; de Koster, Stam, and Balk 2011; Smith, Eldridge, and DeJoy 2016; Wu et al. 2023). Similarly, transactional leaders might promote either focus depending on whether they emphasize and reward maintaining the status quo or seeking gains and advancement. This indicates that the current understanding of how leader behaviors relate to regulatory goals and followers' regulatory focus and creativity is underdeveloped.

To address this conceptual shortcoming, we introduce a novel framework that connects leader regulatory goal setting (LRGS) with employee regulatory focus and creativity. We propose that goal setting is central to leadership (e.g., Yukl 2010) and that leaders communicate their goal expectations to employees by establishing either maximal or minimal goals, which are fundamental to regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997, 1998). Maximal goals—targeting gains, advancement, and ideals—instigate a promotion focus in employees. Conversely, minimal goals—aiming for non-losses, security, and obligations—trigger a prevention focus. Drawing on self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), we propose that employee regulatory focus drives creativity through distinct motivational pathways: A promotion focus enhances creativity by fueling intrinsic motivation for creativity, which is an internalized drive of employees rooted in their aspirations and ideals. Conversely, a prevention focus may inhibit creativity by reinforcing a tendency toward conformity to the leader, resulting in the alignment of employees' attitudes, beliefs, and actions with those of the leader. Figure 1 depicts this conceptual model. We tested our model through a vignette-based experiment and field study, establishing dual-stage mediation processes between LRGS and employee creativity, and assessing its incremental validity beyond transformational and transactional leadership.

We contribute to the literature on leadership, regulatory focus, and creativity in several ways. We introduce a new framework linking LRGS with employee regulatory focus and creativity, grounded in regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997, 1998). This framework clarifies the types of regulatory goals—maximal or minimal—that leaders set, which prior research has overlooked. By integrating insights from regulatory focus theory and self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), we propose that maximal goals foster a promotion focus and enhance intrinsic motivation for creativity, while minimal goals cultivate a prevention focus, bolstering motivation for conformity and impeding creativity. This analysis deepens our understanding of the mechanisms and motivations behind the impact of the regulatory goals leaders set on employee creativity. Furthermore, our research extends beyond the conventional intrapersonal self-regulation approach (Gorman et al. 2012; Lanaj, Chang, and Johnson 2012) to clarify the interpersonal dynamics between leaders and followers (see also Kark and Van Dijk 2007; Righetti, Finkenauer, and Rusbult 2011; Sue-Chan, Wood, and Latham 2012). We demonstrate how leaders can use regulatory goals to influence their followers' regulatory focus and motivation, offering a nuanced understanding of how leaders can shape follower creativity. Therefore, LRGS not only enriches our knowledge of leadership and regulatory focus but also sets the stage for future empirical research and provides practical insights for leadership practices and organizational behavior.

1 | LRGS and Employee Regulatory Focus

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997, 1998) suggests that individuals pursue goals through two distinct foci: promotion and prevention. The core principle is that individuals set specific goals and employ strategies characterized by eagerness or vigilance to achieve them, tailoring their behaviors to the context of their goal pursuit. Preferences and objectives vary, envisioned as either maximal or minimal goals (Higgins 1997; Johnson et al. 2015; Scholer and Higgins 2008). Maximal goals represent the highest aspirations, akin to cognitive benchmarks (Brendl and Higgins 1996). These include gain goals (enhancement in value, profit, or success), advancement goals (progress to a superior status), and ideal goals (realization of hopes, desires, and ambitions) (Brendl, Higgins, and Lemm 1995; Higgins 1987, 2014). Conversely, minimal goals are baseline standards individuals strive to uphold, such as non-loss goals (preserving current value), security goals (ensuring stability), and ought goals (meeting duties and responsibilities) (Brendl and Higgins 1996; Higgins 1987, 2014).

Leaders set goals for employees and convey strategic ways to achieve them (Hamstra et al. 2014; House 1971; Yukl 2010). They can establish either maximal goals—encompassing gains, advancement, and ideals—or minimal goals—focused on avoiding losses, ensuring security, and fulfilling obligations. Leaders can prioritize one type of goal above the other depending on

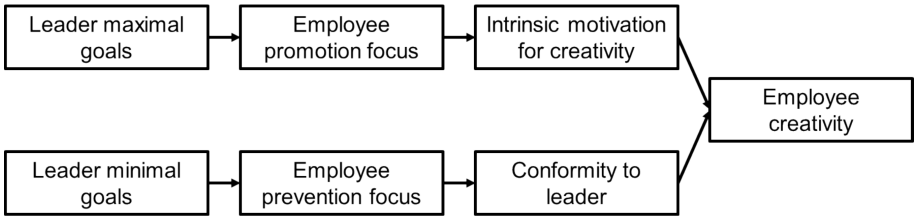

FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model.

desired outcomes. For instance, they may motivate employees to pursue maximal goals in specific projects while stressing error prevention and standard adherence—hallmarks of minimal goals—in others. This allows leaders to tailor regulatory goals to the unique context and individual capabilities of their followers, sometimes personalizing or combining these goals to align with each employee's role and circumstances.

We propose that through goal setting, leaders communicate the regulatory goals they envision for their followers and cultivate the aligned regulatory strategies essential for successful goal achievement (see signaling theory; Spence 1973, 2002). When leaders establish maximal goals, they instruct and motivate employees to strive for gains, progress, and ideals. Such goals signal employees to embrace a promotion focus, steering their attention and actions toward achieving these aspirational end-states. A promotion focus is characterized by an eagerness strategy marked by enthusiasm, optimism, and a proactive stance in chasing positive results. Those with a promotion focus seize every chance and utilize all resources to attain their goals, despite potential risks or uncertainties (Brockner et al. 2002; Crowe and Higgins 1997).

Conversely, when leaders opt for minimal goals, they guide employees to preserve what they have, ensure stability, and meet obligations. Setting such goals signals the need for a prevention focus, directing attention and actions toward sidestepping negative outcomes and upholding the current state of affairs. A prevention focus involves a vigilance strategy, being meticulous, cautious, and precise to circumvent errors. Employees with a prevention focus tend to be risk-averse, ensuring all prerequisites are fulfilled, steering clear of mistakes, and employing methods that guarantee alignment with desired minimal end-states (Brendl and Higgins 1996; Brockner et al. 2002; Higgins 1997, 2000).

Accordingly, we hypothesize the folllowing:

Hypothesis 1. *Leader setting of maximal goals is positively related to employee promotion focus.*

Hypothesis 2. *Leader setting of minimal goals is positively related to employee prevention focus.*

2 | Regulatory Focus, Motivation for Creativity, and Creative Behavior

Regulatory foci are overarching motivational strategies guiding individuals in their goal-directed activities, relating to specific motivational states and behaviors (Johnson et al. 2015; Scholer and Higgins 2008; Vriend et al. 2022). By synthesizing regulatory focus theory with self-determination theory (SDT), we explore the impact of employees' regulatory focus on their creativity. We propose that employees with a promotion focus—seeking to achieve gains, advancements, and ideals—may become more intrinsically motivated toward creativity, fostering creative behaviors. Conversely, employees with a prevention focus—seeking to avoid losses and fulfill obligations—may tend to conform to their leaders' expectations, potentially stifling creativity.

2.1 | Promotion Focus, Intrinsic Motivation, and Creativity

Employees with a promotion focus are inclined toward intrinsic motivation for creativity, engaging in creative tasks for inherent pleasure and challenge rather than external incentives (Amabile et al. 1994; Tierney, Farmer, and Graen 1999). SDT posits that intrinsic motivation thrives when fundamental needs for autonomy (the feeling of self-direction and internal control) and competence (the sense of efficacy and skill) are met (Ryan and Deci 2000). A promotion focus reflects an eagerness strategy of approaching desirable outcomes and pursuing ideal goals. Ideals represent internal or intrinsic needs and desires, and employees striving for those goals are likely to experience a sense of autonomy in their pursuits. Additionally, the eagerness associated with a promotion focus is characterized by being proactive, optimistic, and inventive in pursuing desirable outcomes. This strategy encourages employees to explore all possible ways, including creative ones, to attain their desired end-states. This eager exploration provides them with opportunities to acquire new knowledge, skills, and abilities, thereby enhancing their competence. Hence, we anticipate that a promotion focus will ignite intrinsic motivation for creativity by satisfying the needs for autonomy and competence (Amabile et al. 1994; Ryan and Deci 2000).

Note that even though maximal goals set by leaders can be seen as extrinsic motivators, we posit that these goals appeal to employees' aspirations and ideals, nurturing their intrinsic motivation for creativity (Higgins 1987). When employees perceive the leader's maximal goals as aligned with their own values and interests, they can internalize them as their own personal goals, a phenomenon which is called internalization within SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000). Supporting this, Smith, Wagaman, and Handley (2009) found that a promotion focus intensifies intrinsic motivation, making routine tasks more engaging. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) found that a promotion focus precedes intrinsic motivation, encouraging creativity. Li et al. (2016) observed that the relationship between promotion focus and innovative work behavior is mediated by autonomous motivation. Therefore, we argue that leaders' maximal goals instill a promotion focus in employees, fostering intrinsic motivation for creativity as employees embrace these goals with personal ownership. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3. *Promotion focus is positively related to intrinsic motivation for creativity.*

Intrinsic motivation is crucial for fostering creativity, as it drives and sustains the creative process (Amabile 1983; Ryan and Deci 2000). Employees intrinsically motivated toward creativity engage in creative tasks for the pleasure, fulfillment, and stimulation they provide. This enjoyment leads them to deeply engage with their tasks, dedicating time and energy to identify issues, gather information, and develop creative solutions (Liu et al. 2016; Ryan and Deci 2000). Consequently, intrinsically motivated employees use an explorative processing style, producing novel and useful ideas in their pursuit of gains, advancements, and ideals. In contrast, those lacking intrinsic motivation may default to habitual patterns and established norms (Liu

et al. 2016). The positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and creativity is well-documented, with meta-analytic studies affirming their association (Liu et al. 2016; Tierney, Farmer, and Graen 1999). Based on this reasoning and evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. *Intrinsic motivation for creativity is positively related to creativity.*

We propose that employee promotion focus, which stems from leaders setting maximal goals, is indirectly related to creativity through intrinsic motivation for creativity. Intrinsic motivation for creativity is a more direct and powerful predictor of creative behavior than promotion focus. This assertion aligns with our rationale and supports Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4, leading us to present the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5. *The indirect positive relationship between leader setting of maximal goals and employee creativity is sequentially mediated by employee promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity.*

2.2 | Prevention Focus, Conformity to the Leader, and Creative Behavior

We propose that a prevention focus, triggered by leaders' minimal goals, encourages conformity rather than intrinsic motivation for creativity. This focus emphasizes non-losses, security, and obligations, promoting compliance with externally imposed norms (Sue-Chan, Wood, and Latham 2012). According to SDT, such extrinsic factors shift behavioral causality from internal to external, making individuals feel constrained. Consequently, external pressures fail to nurture self-determination, a key component of intrinsic motivation. Additionally, the vigilant nature of a prevention focus, with its emphasis on caution and risk avoidance, may restrict the pursuit of new avenues and challenges, impeding the growth of competence and intrinsic motivation.

Employees guided by a prevention focus, due to the minimal goals set by their leaders, may be inclined to adhere strictly to their leader's directives. This tendency stems from extrinsic or controlled motivation, as outlined by SDT, where employees feel their goal-pursuit strategies are externally dictated. Such a drive for conformity leads them to align with the leader's perspective, follow their advice, and stick to established protocols (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Cialdini and Trost 1998). The prevention focus, driven by the leader's minimal goals, urges individuals to meet expectations and obligations, thereby avoiding mistakes and minimizing risks. Leaders, seen as protectors of the status quo with the expertise to uphold it (Campbell et al. 2008), become a reference for employees striving to avoid deviations. Consequently, a prevention focus engenders a reliance on the leader's insights and methods to achieve minimal goals and prevent adverse outcomes. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 6. *Prevention focus is positively related to conformity to the leader.*

We propose that an employee's drive to align with their leader's expectations may stifle creativity. Conformity, the propensity to follow social norms (Cialdini and Trost 1998; Magni and Manzoni 2020), typically leads to adherence to the status quo and reluctance to engage in creative behaviors that might disrupt established practices (Kanter 1988; Magni and Manzoni 2020; Woodman, Sawyer, and Griffin 1993; Sawyer 2017). Employees motivated to conform may shape their views, beliefs, and actions to reflect those of their leader, rarely questioning or criticizing the leader's perspectives, proposals, or directives (cf. Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Cialdini and Trost 1998). This conformity, rooted in prevention focus, reduces their independence and the uniqueness of their thinking and actions. Instead of seeking new and useful ideas, they opt for the safety of established thoughts and routines endorsed by their leader. This avoidance of alternative viewpoints, essential for generating creative ideas, significantly limits creativity.

Research supports the idea that conformity adversely impacts creativity. It impedes learning new information and exploring varied options (Woodman, Sawyer, and Griffin 1993), typically resulting in habitual performance and incremental modifications rather than groundbreaking originality and radical creativity (Madjar, Greenberg, and Chen 2011). Thus, the desire to conform to leadership can limit employees' autonomy, diversity of thought, and originality. Those driven by conformity are more likely to follow established guidelines than to forge new and distinctive ideas. Based on these insights, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 7. *Conformity to the leader is negatively related to creativity.*

We propose that employee prevention focus, which stems from leaders setting minimal goals, is indirectly negatively related to creativity through conformity to the leader. We suggest that conformity to the leader's direction is a more immediate and significant predictor of creativity than a prevention focus. This assertion is underpinned by Hypotheses 2, 6, and 7, prompting us to formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 8. *The indirect negative relationship between leader minimal goals and employee creativity is sequentially mediated by employee prevention focus and conformity to leader.*

While literature indicates that a prevention focus can sometimes enhance creativity, particularly in urgent situations or when creative solutions are needed for avoidance objectives (Baas, De Dreu, and Nijstad 2011; Roskes, De Dreu, and Nijstad 2012), these instances fall outside our research scope. Our study examines how a prevention focus might inhibit creativity by fostering conformity to leadership—a type of controlled motivation that reduces employees' autonomy, diversity, and originality. We suggest this tendency is prevalent across various organizational settings, where employees guided by leaders' minimal goals conform to their leaders' viewpoints and directives. Consequently, we expect that a prevention focus is negatively associated with creativity due to its tendency to promote conformity to leadership.

3 | Incremental Validity of LRGS

Several studies have examined how leadership influences follower regulatory focus and creativity (e.g., Henker, Sonnentag, and Unger 2015; Neubert et al. 2008; Shang et al. 2019; Tung 2016; Tung and Yu 2016; Wu et al. 2008). Kark and Van Dijk's (2007) conceptual framework, focusing on transformational and transactional leadership (Avolio and Bass 1991), has laid the foundation for this paradigm. They posit that transformational leaders act as catalysts for change and growth, inducing a promotion focus in followers and thereby enhancing creativity. In contrast, transactional leaders utilize rewards and punishments to motivate and direct followers to fulfill roles and achieve goals, fostering a prevention focus that potentially curtails creativity. Empirical research generally supports the positive effects of transformational leadership on employee promotion focus and creativity, but not the negative effects of transactional leadership on employee prevention focus and creativity (e.g., Henker, Sonnentag, and Unger 2015; Tung 2016).

We argue that previous work has overlooked the nature of goals—maximal or minimal—that leaders set for their followers. For example, leaders can promote either type of goal within transformational or transactional leadership. Transformational leaders may set maximal goals like high aspirations and growth, promoting a promotion focus, or minimal goals like error prevention and safety assurance, eliciting a prevention focus. Research shows, for example, that in a safety context, transformational leaders can enhance safety-oriented behaviors by fostering safety awareness and climate perceptions, aligning with a prevention focus (Barling, Loughlin, and Kelloway 2002; de Koster, Stam, and Balk 2011; Smith, Eldridge, and DeJoy 2016; Wu et al. 2023). Similarly, transactional leaders can use contingent-reward behaviors to incentivize achieving specific targets, both when these represent maximal goals aimed at high-quality outputs or minimal goals focused on meeting standards and minimizing errors.

We introduce a new perspective on how leadership influences employee regulatory focus and creativity, emphasizing the nature of the regulatory goals—maximal or minimal—set by leaders. We propose that LRGS is a more precise, potent and proximal predictor of employee regulatory focus compared to leadership styles that do not specify the nature of regulatory goals. To assess its incremental validity, our research examines the unique effects of LRGS on employee regulatory focus, motivation, and creativity, while controlling for the impact of transformational and transactional leadership. We expect that LRGS will demonstrate significant and distinct effects that exceed those associated with transformational and transactional leadership, establishing LRGS as conceptually unique and empirically distinct, serving as a direct precursor to employee regulatory focus.

4 | Overview of Studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two studies. The first was a vignette-based experiment aimed at establishing a causal relationship between LRGS and employee regulatory focus. It also sought to provide initial evidence for the dual-stage mediation processes, where employee promotion and prevention focus, along with their intrinsic motivation for creativity and conformity to the leader, serve as links between LRGS and employee creativity. To broaden the generalizability of our findings and enhance the ecological validity of our experimental outcomes, we conducted a field study with supervisor-subordinate dyads. This second study was designed to rigorously test our comprehensive conceptual model (Figure 1) and assess the incremental validity of LRGS beyond the effects of transformational and transactional leadership.

5 | Study 1

5.1 | Participants and Procedures

In our first study, we utilized the Prolific platform to enlist 297 employees from across the United States. The sample included 145 males, 146 females, 5 non-binary/third-gender individuals, and 1 participant who preferred not to disclose their gender. The participants' average age was 38.75 years ($SD = 10.45$), and they had an average of 17.99 years of work experience ($SD = 10.99$). Regarding educational attainment, 19.2% (57 participants) held a high school diploma or equivalent, 16.8% (50 participants) had an associate's degree, 41.1% (122 participants) possessed a bachelor's degree, 19.2% (57 participants) had earned a master's degree, 3.4% (10 participants) held a doctorate or professional degree, and 0.3% (one participant) reported a different educational background. Each participant received a compensation of £1.5 (equivalent to $1.88) for their participation. This rate is considered good on Prolific, given the average completion time of 8.27 min (after excluding three extreme outliers with completion times over 150 min) and Prolific's minimum hourly rate of £6. To ensure the integrity of our data, we set rigorous recruitment criteria, mandating that participants be employed at least part-time, possess a minimum of 5 years of work experience, and have an immediate supervisor.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions of a one-factor between-participants design: leader setting of maximal goals ($N = 104$), leader setting of minimal goals ($N = 101$), and a control condition with no specified goals ($N = 92$). They were asked to envision themselves as members of the Product Development department at "Energyproducts," working under a manager with whom they had a positive five-year working relationship. The scenario presented to them involved their department's recent discovery of a novel nuclear element for a client. Their task, as set by their leader, was to brainstorm and record names for this new element. Following their leader's guidance, participants undertook a two-minute exercise to generate names for the nuclear element. Afterward, they completed a survey that included manipulation checks and assessments of their promotion and prevention focus, intrinsic motivation, and conformity to the leader. This experimental procedure and task are particularly suited for our purposes, because it is possible to manipulate LRGS in this paradigm, and measure participants' fluency and originality in idea generation in a relatively objective way (see below; see also Ashton-James and Chartrand 2009; Boot, Nevicka, and Baas 2017; Galinsky et al. 2008; Kray, Galinsky, and Wong 2006).

5.2 | Experimental Manipulation

In the name generation task (Marsh, Ward, and Landau 1999; Rubin, Stoltzfus, and Wall 1991), participants were guided by their leader through instructions that manipulated regulatory goals. Participants assigned to the leader maximal goals condition received the following instructions: *"Your task is to generate a collection of names for the nuclear element. It is crucial that you delight this customer. If you succeed, it could result in significant financial profits and lead to future orders. Be inspired by your ideals, achieve successes and gains, and improve our current situation. See it as your ideal to excel in this task. Generate meaningful and significant names for the nuclear element. Success would be fantastic for our company! So, fulfil your aspirations and ideals by completing this task with excellence. To help you, I have generated six example names for the nuclear element: Pluranium, Utonium, Setanium, Tilenium, Ardium, Zorkinium."*

For those in the leader minimal goals condition, the instructions were as follows: *"Your task is to generate a collection of names for the nuclear element. It is crucial that you do not disappoint this customer. If you fail, it could result in significant financial losses and jeopardize future orders. Fulfil your duty, avoid failures and losses, and do not worsen our current situation. See it as your responsibility not to underperform on this task. Do not generate meaningless and trivial names for the nuclear element. Failure would be disastrous for our company! So, fulfil your responsibilities and duties by completing this task without making mistakes. To help you, I have generated six example names for the nuclear element: Pluranium, Utonium, Setanium, Tilenium, Ardium, Zorkinium."*

For those in the control condition, the instructions were neutral, with no specific goals outlined: "*Your task is to generate a collection of names for the nuclear element. To help you, I have generated six example names for the nuclear element: Pluranium, Utonium, Setanium, Tilenium, Ardium, Zorkinium."*

After receiving their respective instructions, all participants were given two minutes to generate and type out a collection of names for the nuclear element.

5.3 | Measures

5.3.1 | Manipulation Checks

To ensure the effectiveness of our manipulations, we employed an adapted version of the supervisor regulatory orientation scale by Sue-Chan, Wood, and Latham (2012) as a manipulation check for LRGS. This scale comprised four items each for both leader setting of maximal goals and leader setting of minimal goals, prefaced with "My leader instructed me to primarily focus on ..." The four leader maximal goal items ($\alpha = 0.84$) were "achieving positive task outcomes," "achieving success," "my aspirations and ideals," and "fulfilling my work as successfully as possible." The four leader minimal goal items ($\alpha = 0.85$) were "avoiding negative task outcomes," "avoiding failure," "my duties and responsibilities," and "fulfilling my work as correctly as possible."

5.3.2 | Employee Regulatory Focus

To measure employee regulatory focus, we utilized an adapted version of the 12-item scale by Johnson and Chang (2008). This assessment was divided into two six-item constructs: employee promotion focus ($\alpha = 0.90$) and employee prevention focus ($\alpha = 0.93$), with each item initiating with the prompt "When performing the task ..." Items measuring promotion focus included statements like "I was focused on successful experiences while generating names," and "I thought about positive aspects of the task." Conversely, items measuring prevention focus contained statements such as "I was focused on failure experiences while generating names," and "I was fearful about failing to prevent negative outcomes."

5.3.3 | Intrinsic Motivation for Creativity

We measured intrinsic motivation for creativity using an adapted version of the five-item scale developed by Tierney et al. (1999; $\alpha = 0.90$). Two example items are as follows: "I enjoyed generating names for the nuclear element" and "I enjoyed engaging in creative thinking about names."

5.3.4 | Conformity to Leader

To assess employee conformity to leader, we used seven items of the conformity scale from Mehrabian and Stefl (1995; $\alpha = 0.85$). This scale included statements such as the following: "I relied on, and acted upon, the example items my leader gave me" and "I preferred to give in and go along with my leader rather than have my way."

5.3.5 | Creativity

For the name generation task, leaders provided participants with six example names ending in "IUM" for the nuclear element, supposedly to help participants. Participants were then given a two-minute window to generate their own set of names. In alignment with established studies (e.g., Ashton-James and Chartrand 2009; Galinsky et al. 2008; Kray, Galinsky, and Wong 2006), we evaluated the creative output by measuring both fluency and originality of the names produced. Fluency was determined by the total number of names each participant generated. Originality was measured by the unique names participants generated that did not end in "IUM," distinguishing them from new names ending in "IUM," which were considered less original as they followed the example names provided by the leader. The assessment of originality involved calculating the proportion of unique names—those not ending in "IUM"—relative to each participant's total output. One participant had not generated any names, resulting in a fluency score of 0 and no originality score could be calculated. The distribution of the creative originality variable was positively skewed because 137 out of 297 participants followed the leader's example, creating only names that ended in "IUM." This resulted in a zero originality

score for these participants. To address the skewness and prepare the data for regression analysis, we implemented a logarithmic transformation. This involved adding a small constant (0.01) to all values to avoid the undefined logarithm of zero and then taking the natural logarithm of the adjusted values. This transformation reduced the skewness, allowing us to include the creative originality variable in our regression analyses and interpret the results more reliably. Importantly, substantive conclusions drawn from our statistical analyses are similar regardless of whether the transformed or untransformed originality variable is included, indicating that the logarithmic transformation was an appropriate method for stabilizing variance and reducing the skewness of the distribution.

5.4 | Data Analyses

To evaluate the effectiveness of the LRGS manipulation and to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 on effects of LRGS on employee regulatory focus, we first used one-way ANOVA along with Bonferroni post hoc tests. We then followed procedures outlined by Hayes (2018) to test our mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 3–8). Specifically, we used lavaan 0.6-17 in R (Rosseel 2012) to estimate a multivariate linear regression path model for the proposed mediation chain. For our path model, we included two dummy variables to represent the three experimental conditions: leader maximal goals (0 = *control condition*; 1 = *leader maximal goals condition*) and leader minimal goals (0 = *control condition*; 1 = *leader minimal goals condition*). We then applied bootstrapping to determine bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals for the proposed indirect relationships. We set our confidence intervals at 95%, establishing the significance of the indirect effects at a p value less than 0.05. This method estimates the indirect relationships between LRGS and creativity mediated by employee regulatory focus (promotion and prevention) and the specific motivational states (intrinsic motivation for creativity and conformity to the leader).

5.5 | Results

5.5.1 | Descriptives and Intercorrelations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among study variables. The dummy-coded variable for the leader's setting of maximal goals shows a positive association with employee promotion focus ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$), whereas the leader's setting of minimal goals correlates positively with employee prevention focus ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the data reveal a strong positive correlation between employee promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$), and a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation for creativity and creative fluency ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, employee prevention focus is positively linked to conformity to the leader ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), while conformity to the leader negatively correlates with creative originality ($r = -0.17$, $p < 0.01$). These findings align well with the predictions of our conceptual model.

5.5.2 | Manipulation Checks

ANOVA results indicated significant effects of LRGS on the manipulation check measures of both leader setting of maximal goals, $F(2, 294) = 11.29$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$, and leader setting of minimal goals, $F(2, 294) = 32.91$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$. Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that participants perceived higher levels of maximal goals set by the leader in the maximal goals condition ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 0.89$) than in the minimal goals condition ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.40$; $p < 0.001$) and the no goals control condition ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.13$; $p < 0.001$), while participants' perceptions of maximal goals did not differ between the minimal goals and no goals control conditions. Participants also perceived higher levels of minimal goals set by the leader in the minimal goals condition ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.06$) than in the maximal goals condition ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.26$; $p < 0.001$) and no goals control condition ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.33$; $p < 0.001$), while the participants'

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

Variable	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Leader maximal goals	0.35	0.48							
2. Leader minimal goals	0.34	0.48	−0.53***						
3. Employee promotion focus	5.15	1.25	0.21***	−0.05	0.90				
4. Employee prevention focus	3.01	1.58	−0.22***	0.28***	−0.31***	0.93			
5. Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity	4.87	1.68	0.10	−0.12*	0.63***	−0.42**	0.90		
6. Employee conformity to leader	4.35	1.12	−0.09	0.13*	−0.03	0.17**	−0.11	0.85	
7. Employee creative fluency	6.81	3.39	0.02	−0.03	0.04	−0.18**	0.17**	−0.05	
8. Employee creative originality	0.28	0.33	0.01	0.02	0.05	0.08	−0.05	−0.17**	0.02

Note: $N = 297$, except for employee creative originality for which $N = 296$.
*$p < 0.05$,
**$p < 0.01$,
***$p < 0.001$.

perceptions of minimal goals set by the leader did not differ between the maximal goals and no goals control conditions. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of the LRGS manipulation.

5.5.3 | LRGS Hypotheses

The ANOVA results revealed significant effects of LRGS on both employee promotion focus, $F(2, 294) = 7.37$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$, and employee prevention focus, $F(2, 294) = 13.95$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$. Subsequent Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that employees in the leader setting of maximal goals condition exhibited a significantly higher promotion focus ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.11$) compared to those in the minimal goals ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.21$; $p < 0.05$) and no goals control ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.35$; $p < 0.001$) conditions, while employee promotion focus did not differ significantly between the minimal goals and no goals control conditions. These results support Hypothesis 1. In addition, employee prevention focus was significantly higher in the leader setting of minimal goals condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.74$) than in the maximal goals ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.30$; $p < 0.001$) and no goals control ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.49$; $p < 0.001$) conditions, with no significant difference between the maximal goals and no goals control conditions. These findings confirm Hypothesis 2.

5.5.4 | Mediational Hypotheses

Our multivariate linear regression path model aimed at testing the mediational hypotheses revealed significant findings. As depicted in Table 2, leader setting of maximal goals demonstrated a positive relationship with employee promotion focus ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), which, in turn, was positively associated with intrinsic motivation for creativity ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, a significant relationship emerged between intrinsic motivation for creativity and creative fluency ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$), while the association with creative originality was not significant ($\beta = -0.08$, *ns*). These results provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 3, while offering partial confirmation for Hypothesis 4. Furthermore, the analysis uncovered a significant mediational pathway from leader setting of maximal goals to employee creative fluency as mediated by employee promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity. The results indicate a significant indirect relationship, $\beta = 0.029$ (95% CI: 0.007; 0.07), $p < 0.05$, providing support for Hypothesis 5.

Furthermore, leader setting of minimal goals demonstrated a positive relationship with employee prevention focus ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$), which subsequently showed a positive link to conformity to the leader ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, a negative association was found between conformity to leader and creative originality ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$), but not with creative fluency ($\beta = -0.01$, *ns*), thus supporting Hypotheses 2 and 6, and offering partial support for Hypothesis 7. Furthermore, the mediational pathway from the leader's setting of minimal goals to employee creative originality, mediated by employee prevention focus and conformity to the leader, exhibited a significant indirect relationship, $\beta = -0.007$ (95% CI: −0.02; −0.001), $p < 0.05$, providing support for Hypothesis 8.

TABLE 2 | Standardized regression path model estimates.

Variables	Employee promotion focus		Employee prevention focus		Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity		Employee conformity to leader		Employee creative fluency		Employee creative originality	
	β	*se*	*β*	*se*	*β*	*se*	*β*	*se*	*β*	*se*	*β*	*se*
Leader maximal goals	0.25***	0.07	−0.10	0.07	−0.12*	0.05	−0.03	0.07	0.02	0.07	0.03	0.07
Leader minimal goals	0.08	0.07	0.24***	0.07	−0.08	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.07	−0.01	0.07
Employee promotion focus					0.57***	0.04	0.02	0.06	−0.14	0.07	0.12	0.07
Employee prevention focus					−0.25***	0.04	0.15*	0.06	−0.14*	0.06	0.08	0.06
Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity									0.20**	0.08	−0.08	0.08
Employee conformity to leader									−0.01	0.06	−0.19**	0.06
R^2	0.05		0.09		0.41		0.04		0.06		0.05	

Note: $N = 296$.
*$p < 0.05$,
**$p < 0.01$,
***$p < 0.001$.

5.6 | Discussion

Study 1 provided causal evidence for the impact of leader setting of maximal (minimal) goals on enhancing employee promotion focus (prevention focus). Our results also partly confirm the mediational hypotheses. We discovered that employee promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity act as sequential mediators in the indirect relationship between leader setting of maximal goals and employee creative fluency, though not affecting creative originality. Furthermore, our study indicates that employee prevention focus and conformity to leader are mediators connecting leader setting of minimal goals to employee originality, though this does not extend to creative fluency. These findings indicate that when leaders set maximal goals, the resulting promotion focus and intrinsic motivation in employees predominantly enhance their creativity by fostering fluency—increasing the generation of both unoriginal and original ideas. In contrast, when leaders set minimal goals, the resulting prevention focus and conformity to the leader primarily impede the production of original ideas, presumably because such ideas deviate from the leader's explicit expectations.

Despite the insights and causal evidence gained from the vignette study, the scenarios featuring imaginary leaders represent a controlled simplification and limitation of real-life leadership dynamics. By focusing on manipulating the leaders' setting of regulatory goals and minimizing other potentially confounding factors, such as social relationship characteristics, we optimized the internal validity of our experiment. However, this approach excludes the complexities of real-life leadership dynamics in longer-lasting relationships. Consequently, while our findings provide valuable causal evidence, the study's experimental design limits the broader generalizability of our findings to real-world settings where leadership interactions are more complex and multifaceted. Additionally, Study 1 did not explore the incremental validity of LRGS beyond the leadership styles already known to influence employee regulatory focus and creativity. To overcome these limitations, we conducted a field survey with supervisor-employee pairs in actual organizations.

6 | Study 2

6.1 | Sample and Procedure

To test our hypotheses in a field setting, we collected two-wave time-split, multisource data from employees and leaders in different companies in the Netherlands. After leaders agreed to participate in our research, they provided contact details of themselves and their subordinates. To limit their work and to increase accuracy, we asked leaders to list and rate a maximum of 10 subordinates. To avoid selection bias, leaders with more than 10 subordinates listed their first 10 employees according to alphabetic order.

In the first wave of our study, we measured LRGS, anticipating its immediate impact on employee regulatory focus. Consequently, we also assessed employee regulatory focus during this first wave, expecting it to mirror leader goal setting and remain relatively stable over a 3-month span. The second wave involved measuring employee creativity and the motivational states (i.e., intrinsic motivation for creativity and conformity to leadership) that serve as mediators in the relationship with regulatory focus. A 3-month interval was selected based on the premise that it would allow sufficient time for the employees' regulatory focus to affect their motivational states and, in turn, their creative behavior. This period also provides leaders adequate time to observe and assess any changes in employee creativity, an important consideration since leader evaluations were used to measure this variable. A shorter time lag might not adequately capture the unfolding processes, while a longer one risks introducing confounding factors that could obscure the observed relationships (Taris and Kompier 2014). Our choice of a 3-month gap is corroborated by similar studies that have employed such timeframes to track the evolution of cognitive-motivational states (e.g., mindfulness, work engagement) and the emergence of creative behaviors in response to leadership dynamics (Bednall et al. 2018; Gerlach, Hundeling, and Rosing 2021; Liang et al. 2022; Mulligan et al. 2021; Tierney and Farmer 2011).

We invited 916 employees and their 125 leaders to participate in our study for wave one. A total of 645 employees (70.41%) and 106 leaders (84.80%) completed the first questionnaire. We were able to match complete responses of 564 employees and their 105 leaders and contacted these for participation in wave two. A total of 449 employees (79.61%) and 85 leaders (80.95%) completed the second questionnaire. Ultimately, we were able to match 335 employee-leader dyads, with 73 leaders from 56 different companies. Of the 335 employees, 181 were male and 154 female, with an average age of 43.36 years ($SD = 10.80$, *range* = 21 to 64) and organizational tenure of 11.49 years ($SD = 10.12$, *range* = 0 to 41), with most employees holding at least a bachelor degree (229). Of the 73 leaders, 51 were male and 22 female, with an average age of 48.10 years ($SD = 8.10$, *range* = 29 to 61; 1 missing) and organizational tenure of 15.04 years ($SD = 10.24$, *range* = 0 to 40), with most leaders holding at least a bachelor degree (67). On average, leaders rated 4.59 employees ($SD = 2.51$), ranging between 1 and 10.

6.2 | Measures

All scales used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). As the questionnaires were in Dutch, we translated the scales from English to Dutch using a back-translation procedure (Brislin 1970). We administered all scales among employees, except for employee creativity, which we administered among leaders.

6.3 | LRGS

We measured LRGS at T1 using an adapted version of the supervisor regulatory orientation scale of Sue-Chan, Wood, and Latham (2012). Both leader maximal goals and leader minimal goals consisted of four items, and all items started with "My leader motivates me to primarily focus on ..." The four leader maximal goal items were ($\alpha = 0.88$): "achieving positive outcomes at work," "achieving success at work," "my aspirations and ideals when working," and "fulfilling my work as successful as possible." The four leader minimal goal items were ($\alpha = 0.74$)

"avoiding negative outcomes at work," "avoiding failure at work," "my duties and responsibilities when working," and "fulfilling my work as correct as possible."

6.3.1 | Employee Regulatory Focus

We measured employee regulatory focus at T1 using the 12-item scale of Johnson and Chang (2008). Employee promotion focus ($\alpha = 0.78$) was measured by six items, example items, including "I am focused on successful experiences that occur while working" and "In general, I tend to think about positive aspects of my work." Employee prevention focus ($\alpha = 0.84$) was also measured by six items. Example items were "I am focused on failure experiences that occur while working" and "In general, I tend to think about negative aspects of my work."

6.3.2 | Intrinsic Motivation for Creativity

We measured intrinsic motivation for creativity at T2 using the five-item scale developed by Tierney et al. (1999; $\alpha = 0.71$), example items including "I enjoy finding solutions to complex problems" and "I enjoy coming up with new ideas for products."

6.3.3 | Conformity to Leader

We measured conformity to leader at T2 using a seven-item scale that was based on the conformity scale of Mehrabian and Stefl (1995; $\alpha = 0.71$). Example items were "In my work, I often rely on, and act upon, the advice of my leader," "My leader can easily influence and change my ideas," and "I prefer to make my own decisions at work rather than following my leader" (reversed coded).

6.3.4 | Creativity

Employee creativity was measured at T2 using the nine-item leader rating scale of Tierney et al. (1999; $\alpha = 0.93$). Leader ratings of employee creativity have often been used in previous research (e.g., George and Zhou 2001; Oldham and Cummings 1996). Example items were "[Name employee] demonstrated originality in his/her work" and "[Name employee] generated novel, but operable work-related ideas."

6.3.5 | Control Variables

We controlled for various exogenous variables, which we all measured at T1. First, we included employee gender (1 = male; 2 = female), age, and educational level (1 = primary school; 2 = high school; 3 = vocational education; 4 = higher vocational education; 5 = university; 6 = PhD) as control variables, as they have been shown to be important predictors of creativity (e.g., Baer and Kaufman 2008; Fasko 2000; Ruth and Birren 1985; Zhang and Bartol 2010). Second, to demonstrate the incremental impact of LRGS, we accounted for established leadership styles by controlling for both transformational and transactional leadership, which is in line with best practice recommendations on the use of control variables (Bernerth and Aguinis 2016). Transformational leadership was measured using the seven-item Global Transformational Leadership (GTL) scale of Carless et al. (2000; $\alpha = 0.89$). Example items were "My leader communicates a clear and positive vision of the future" and "My leader gives encouragement and recognition to staff." Transactional leadership was measured using Avolio, Bass, and Jung's (1999) four-item contingent reward scale ($\alpha = 0.86$), which is generally considered to be the most characteristic dimension of transactional leadership behaviors (Judge and Picollo 2004). Example items were "My leader clarifies rewards" and "My leader rewards my achievement." In line with our theoretical rationale, the hypothesized relationships hold regardless of whether transformational and transactional leadership are included in the statistical analyses.

6.4 | Convergent and Divergent Validity

To affirm both convergent and divergent validity among our measures, we employed various measurement models via the lavaan 0.6-17 package in R (Rosseel 2012). Considering the relatively modest sample size to parameter ratio ($N = 335$ to $N = 52$, or 6.44:1), we utilized item parcels created through the single-factor method (Landis, Beal, and Tesluk 2000) to estimate these models. Specifically, we created item parcels by combining the highest and lowest loading items based on separate factor analyses per individual construct. This combinatory process continued either until all items were parceled or until three indicators for the respective construct remained. We compared measurement models by means of χ^2-differences, and we assessed model fit using the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). In our baseline model, we loaded the parcels for leader maximal and minimal goals, employee promotion and prevention focus, intrinsic motivation for creativity, conformity to leader, creativity, and transformational and transactional leadership on their respective construct without cross-loadings. We included transformational and transactional leadership because of their importance in establishing the incremental validity of LRGS. This baseline model had an acceptable fit, $\chi^2[398] = 670.46$ (RMSEA = 0.05 [90%: 0.04; 0.05]; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94). We compared this baseline model to various other models in which we collapsed constructs (see Table 3 for an overview).

First, the baseline model was superior to models in which we collapsed leader maximal and minimal goals (Model 1), leader maximal goals and employee promotion focus (Model 2) and leader minimal goals and employee prevention focus (Model 3). These results confirm basic tenets of regulatory focus theory that maximal and minimal goals are distinct both from one another, as well as from the respective promotion and prevention foci they are prone to effectuate. Second, the baseline model was superior to a model in which we collapsed leader maximal goals and transformational leadership (Model 4) and leader minimal goals and transactional leadership (Model 5). These results indicate that while maximal (minimal) goals may be related to transformational (transactional) leadership, they are distinct constructs within the leadership conceptual space. Finally, the

TABLE 3 | Confirmatory factor analyses.

Models	χ^2	df	RMSEA (90% CI)	CFI	TLI	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$
Baseline model	670.46	398	0.05 (0.04; 0.05)	0.95	0.94	
Model 1: leader maximal goals and leader minimal goals collapsed	958.72	406	0.06 (0.06; 0.07)	0.90	0.89	288.26(8)***
Model 2: leader maximal goals and employee promotion focus collapsed	822.86	406	0.06 (0.05; 0.06)	0.93	0.91	152.4(8)***
Model 3: leader minimal goals and employee prevention focus collapsed	989.73	406	0.07 (0.06; 0.07)	0.90	0.88	319.27(8)***
Model 4: leader maximal goals and transformational leadership collapsed	865.15	406	0.06 (0.05; 0.06)	0.92	0.91	194.69(8)***
Model 5: leader minimal goals and transactional leadership collapsed	1191.80	406	0.08 (0.07; 0.08)	0.86	0.84	521.34(8)***
Model 6: all factors collapsed	3597.62	434	0.15 (0.14; 0.15)	0.44	0.40	2927.16(36)***

Note: $N = 335$.
***$p < 0.001$.

baseline model was superior to a model in which we collapsed all variables (Model 6). All in all, these comparisons provide support for convergent and divergent validity.

6.5 | Selective Attrition

Given that some employee-leader dyads dropped out during the study, either due to employees not participating at T2 or leaders not providing creativity ratings, we analyzed whether our control and focal variables descriptively differed between respondents who dropped out and those respondents who were part of our analyses. Results showed differences in education, $F(1, 638) = 12.05$, $p < 0.001$, transformational leadership, $F(1, 643) = 7.44$, $p < 0.01$, employee prevention focus, $F(1, 643) = 8.21$, $p < 0.01$, and intrinsic motivation for creativity, $F(1, 447) = 6.69$, $p < 0.05$. Compared to respondents that dropped out, respondents within our final sample scored higher on education ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.79$ vs. $M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.86$) and transformational leadership ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.67$ vs. $M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.77$) and lower on employee prevention focus ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.71$ vs. $M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.72$) and intrinsic motivation for creativity ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.58$ vs. $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.53$). These differences are (most likely) due to the fact that six blue-collar production teams from one organization, mostly consisting of lower educated employees, only participated at T1. These teams worked in a food producing company, in which safety procedures are important, which may be the reason that employees' prevention focus was higher. No other differences between dropouts and employees that are part of our samples were found.

6.6 | Data Analyses

The nature of the hypothesized effects and data collected to test them suggest a multilevel model with a mediation structure. Indeed, the intraclass correlations indicate a reasonable amount of variance on the leader level (ICC1's between 0.06 and 0.32, $M = 0.17$), suggesting that the nested structure of employees within leaders needs to be modeled (Hox 2002; Snijders and Bosker 1999).

Given that we are interested in the dyadic relationship at the employee level, we used lavaan 0.6-17 in R (Rosseel 2012) to estimate an unconflated multilevel path model (Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang 2010) to test our hypotheses. This unconflated multilevel path model allows the separation of within-level effects (i.e., employees) and between-level effects (i.e., leaders) through estimating a statistical model that includes both these group-mean centered predictor variables (employees at Level 1 [within]) as well as their group means (leaders at Level 2 [between]) in a single multilevel model (cf. Snijders and Bosker 1999). Estimates at the within-level allow us to draw conclusions about effects that leaders have on their individual employees, whereas estimates at the between-level indicate effects that leaders have on the entire group of employees. Given the employee-level nature of our hypotheses, we focus on the within-level effects, but report between-level effects for reader interest.

To test the proposed mediation relationships between our study variables in this multilevel model, we used a Monte Carlo method for mediation procedure (Selig and Preacher 2008). This estimates indirect effects based on relevant (co)variances of the variables involved in the mediation chain, which provides an indication of the degree of mediation (i.e., the size of the indirect effect). These indirect effects are then bootstrapped to arrive at a confidence interval that indicates whether the indirect effect is significantly different from 0. For our purposes, we estimated confidence intervals at 95% to conclude whether the proposed indirect effects were significant at $p < 0.05$.

7 | Results

Table 4 displays the means, standard deviations, intra-class correlations, and zero-order intercorrelations of the study variables.

TABLE 4 | Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Control variables												
1. Employee gender (1 = male; 2 = female)	—											
2. Employee age	−0.07	—										
3. Employee education	−0.05	−0.25***	—									
4. Transformational leadership	0.22***	0.00	−0.01	(0.89)								
5. Transactional leadership	0.05	−0.05	−0.03	0.64***	(0.86)							
Conceptual model variables												
6. Leader maximal goals	0.21***	−0.04	−0.08	0.73***	0.61***	(0.88)						
7. Leader minimal goals	0.01	0.06	−0.18***	0.18***	0.19***	0.30***	(0.74)					
8. Employee promotion focus	0.16**	−0.05	−0.02	0.45***	0.43***	0.51***	0.22***	(0.78)				
9. Employee prevention focus	−0.02	−0.09	−0.01	−0.19***	−0.16**	−0.17**	0.09	−0.18***	(0.84)			
10. Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity	−0.04	−0.03	0.07	0.20***	0.23***	0.23***	0.06	0.29***	−0.09	(0.71)		
11. Employee conformity to leader	0.07	−0.16**	−0.09	0.12*	0.10	0.12*	0.17**	0.06	0.28***	−0.09	(0.71)	
12. Employee creativity	0.00	−0.07	0.10	0.19***	0.26***	0.21***	0.00	0.18***	−0.24***	0.26***	−0.15**	(0.93)
ICC_1	0.31	0.17	0.32	0.24	0.19	0.17	0.06	0.11	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.29
M	1.46	43.36	3.80	3.84	3.58	3.89	3.46	3.94	2.01	3.67	3.08	3.26
SD	0.50	10.80	0.79	0.67	0.80	0.68	0.64	0.49	0.71	0.58	0.51	0.73

Note: Cronbach's alphas between parentheses on the diagonal.
*$p < 0.05$,
**$p < 0.01$,
***$p < 0.001$.

With regard to the correlations, it is interesting to note that transformational leadership is positively related to leader setting of both maximal goals ($r=0.73$, $p<0.001$) and minimal goals ($r=0.18$, $p<0.001$), at the zero-order level. Likewise, transactional leadership was also found to be positively related to leader setting of both maximal goals ($r=0.61$, $p<0.001$) and minimal goals ($r=0.19$, $p<0.001$). This is consistent with our argument that transformational and transactional leadership may both endorse different types of regulatory goals.

The standardized results of our analyses are presented in Tables 5a (within-level effects) and 5b (between-level effects). Regarding our leader maximal goals-employee creativity hypotheses, results show significant positive associations between leader maximal goals and employee promotion focus ($\gamma=0.31$, $p<0.001$), between employee promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity ($\gamma=0.20$, $p<0.01$), and between intrinsic motivation for creativity and creativity ($\gamma=0.12$, $p<0.05$), supporting Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4. Moreover, results reveal a significant mediation path of leader maximal goals to employee creativity through employee promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity, $\gamma=0.0075$ (95% CI: 0.0007; 0.02), $p<0.05$, supporting Hypothesis 5. It is noteworthy that leader maximal goals are also significantly and directly related to employee intrinsic motivation for creativity ($\gamma=0.20$, $p<0.01$), suggesting that employee promotion focus, as a first-stage mediator, only partially mediates the relationship between leader maximal goals and employee intrinsic motivation for creativity. Furthermore, employee promotion focus is not significantly directly related to employee creativity ($\gamma=0.09$, ns), indicating that employee intrinsic motivation for creativity, as a second-stage mediator, fully mediates the relationship between promotion focus and creativity.

Regarding our leader minimal goals-employee creativity hypotheses, results show significant positive links between leader minimal goals and employee prevention focus ($\gamma=0.11$, $p<0.05$), and employee prevention focus and conformity to leader ($\gamma=0.29$, $p<0.001$), and a negative link between conformity to leader and creativity ($\gamma=-0.17$, $p<0.01$), supporting Hypotheses 2, 6, and 7. Moreover, results reveal a significant mediation path of leader minimal goals to employee creativity through employee prevention focus and conformity to leader, $\gamma=-0.0055$ (95% CI: −0.01; −0.0001), $p<0.05$, supporting Hypothesis 8. The results show that leader minimal goals are also significantly and directly related to employee conformity to leader ($\gamma=0.14$, $p<0.01$), indicating that employee prevention focus, as a first-stage mediator, only partially mediates the relationship between leader minimal goals and employee conformity to leader. Furthermore, employee prevention focus is not significantly directly related to employee creativity ($\gamma=0.07$, *ns*), indicating that employee conformity to leader, as a second-stage mediator, fully mediates the relationship between employee prevention focus and employee creativity.

Concerning the incremental validity of LRGS, it is essential to note that our hypotheses were tested while accounting for transformational and transactional leadership styles. The influence of LRGS was found above and beyond these leadership styles. Our findings indicate that LRGS serves as a stronger and more immediate predictor of employee regulatory focus and other outcomes compared to transformational and transactional leadership. Specifically, our data revealed positive zero-order correlations between both transformational leadership ($r=0.45$, $p<0.001$) and transactional leadership ($r=0.43$, $p<0.001$) with employee promotion focus. Conversely, both leadership styles were negatively correlated with employee prevention focus (transformational leadership: $r=-0.19$, $p<0.001$; transactional leadership: $r=-0.16$, $p<0.01$). However, when LRGS was included in multilevel regression analyses, the associations of transformational leadership with employee promotion focus ($\gamma=0.13$, *ns*) and prevention focus ($\gamma=-0.15$, *ns*) became non-significant. Similarly, the associations of transactional leadership with employee promotion focus ($\gamma=0.12$, *ns*) and prevention focus ($\gamma=-0.004$, *ns*) also turned non-significant. These outcomes further substantiate the incremental validity of LRGS, supporting our assertion that it is a more precise, direct, and immediate predictor of employee regulatory focus than the other two leadership styles. Furthermore, the hypothesized relationships among the variables in our conceptual model remain consistent, irrespective of the inclusion of transformational and transactional leadership in the statistical models.

8 | Discussion

The present paper examined the dynamics between leader regulatory goal setting (LRGS) and employee creativity. We proposed that existing leadership models, which have been linked to employee creativity through influencing regulatory focus, lack clarity in defining leaders' regulatory goals for their employees. Clarifying these goals could illuminate new aspects of how leadership influences employee creativity. We introduced LRGS as a framework that categorizes leaders' goals into two types: maximal (focused on achieving gains, advancements, and ideals) and minimal (focused on avoiding losses, maintaining security, and fulfilling obligations).

Drawing on data from 297 participants in a vignette-based experiment (Study 1) and 335 pairs of employees and leaders across a variety of Dutch organizations and industries (Study 2), we discovered a positive relationship between leader maximal goal setting and creativity among employees. This relationship was mediated sequentially by employees' promotion focus and intrinsic motivation for creativity. Conversely, the setting of minimal goals by leaders can reduce employee creativity. This relationship was mediated sequentially by an increased prevention focus and a heightened propensity for employees to conform to their leader. Additionally, the findings from Study 2 reveal that LRGS is instrumental in molding employee regulatory focus and creativity, controlled for the influence of both transformational and transactional leadership styles. Although our data indicates that these leadership styles positively correlate with employee promotion and prevention focus, the inclusion of LRGS significantly shifts this dynamic. Specifically, the positive association between transformational leadership and employees' promotion focus, along with their intrinsic motivation and creativity, disappears. In a similar vein, when LRGS is factored in, transactional leadership's relationship with employee regulatory focus and subsequent outcomes—except for creativity—is negligible. This underscores the relative importance of LRGS as a determinant of employee regulatory focus, which had a stronger influence

TABLE 5A | Standardized multilevel regression path model estimates for within-effects.

	Employee promotion focus		Employee prevention focus		Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity		Employee conformity to leader		Employee creativity	
Variables	γ	*se*	γ	*se*	γ	*se*	γ	*se*	γ	*se*
Control variables										
Employee gender (1 = male; 2 = female)	0.02	0.05	0.08	0.05	−0.11*	0.05	0.03	0.05	−0.13**	0.05
Employee age	0.01	0.05	−0.11*	0.05	0.01	0.05	−0.16**	0.05	−0.21***	0.05
Employee education	0.02	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	−0.15**	0.05	0.04	0.05
Transformational leadership	0.13	0.07	−0.15	0.08	−0.08	0.08	0.06	0.08	−0.08	0.08
Transactional leadership	0.12	0.06	−0.004	0.07	0.05	0.07	−0.01	0.07	0.23***	0.06
Conceptual model variables										
Leader maximal goals	0.31***	0.07	−0.05	0.08	0.20**	0.08	−0.01	0.08	0.02	0.08
Leader minimal goals	0.10*	0.05	0.11*	0.06	−0.03	0.05	0.14**	0.05	−0.02	0.05
Employee promotion focus					0.20**	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.09	0.06
Employee prevention focus					−0.01	0.05	0.29***	0.05	−0.07	0.05
Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity									0.12*	0.05
Employee conformity to leader									−0.17**	0.05
R^2	0.28		0.06		0.11		0.17		0.18	
Variance	0.72***	0.04	0.94***	0.02	0.89***	0.03	0.83***	0.04	0.82***	0.04

Note: $N = 335$.
*$p < 0.05$,
**$p < 0.01$,
***$p < 0.001$.

TABLE 5B | Standardized multilevel regression path model estimates for between-effects.

	Employee promotion focus		Employee prevention focus		Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity		Employee conformity to leader		Employee creativity	
Variables	γ	*se*	γ	*se*	γ	*se*	γ	*se*	γ	*se*
Intercept	10.69***	1.97	7.09***	1.84	6.24*	2.81	10.01***	2.71	3.22	2.80
Control variables										
Employee gender (1 = male; 2 = female)	0.25**	0.10	−0.19	0.11	−0.05	0.12	0.04	0.11	0.001	0.11
Employee age	−0.19	0.10	−0.20	0.12	−0.12	0.13	−0.20	0.12	0.12	0.12
Employee education	−0.03	0.11	−0.16	0.12	0.13	0.12	0.06	0.12	0.03	0.11
Transformational leadership	0.07	0.16	0.29	0.19	0.36	0.18	0.28	0.18	−0.06	0.18
Transactional leadership	0.43**	0.14	−0.48**	0.16	0.16	0.18	0.10	0.17	0.07	0.16
Conceptual model variables										
Leader maximal goals	0.005	0.17	−0.16	0.20	−0.39*	0.19	0.11	0.19	0.48**	0.18
Leader minimal goals	0.07	0.10	0.29*	0.12	0.02	0.13	−0.06	0.12	−0.09	0.12
Employee promotion focus					0.30*	0.14	−0.26*	0.13	−0.23	0.13
Employee prevention focus					−0.04	0.12	0.42***	0.11	−0.21	0.12
Employee intrinsic motivation for creativity									0.30**	0.11
Employee conformity to leader									−0.11	0.11
R^2	0.42		0.20		0.24		0.31		0.35	
Variance	0.58***	0.08	0.80***	0.08	0.77***	0.08	0.70***	0.08	0.65***	0.09

Note: $N = 73$.
*$p < 0.05$,
**$p < 0.01$,
***$p < 0.001$.

than transformational and transactional leadership styles that have previously been proposed (Kark and Van Dijk 2007) and empirically related to employee regulatory focus and creativity (e.g., Henker, Sonnentag, and Unger 2015; Tung 2016).

Study 2's findings show that transactional leadership consistently maintains a positive effect on employee creativity, even alongside LRGS. This suggests that the motivational power of transactional leadership comes from factors beyond employees' regulatory focus and intrinsic motivation. Prior studies indicate that external incentives for creative work and effort-reward fairness may promote creative and innovative activities (Byron and Khazanchi 2012; Eisenberger and Rhoades 2001; Janssen 2000). Transactional leadership may foster incentives for creativity and a sense of fairness, encouraging creative behavior.

In summary, our research establishes LRGS as a distinct framework that extends traditional leadership models in influencing employee regulatory focus and creativity. Specifically, maximal goals set by leaders foster a promotion focus in employees, enhancing intrinsic motivation and promoting creativity, while minimal goals cultivate a prevention focus in employees, bolstering conformity to the leader and impeding creativity.

8.1 | Theoretical and Managerial Implications

Our research makes a significant contribution to the literatures on leadership, regulatory focus, and creativity. A dominant paradigm in this field, grounded in regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997, 1998), suggests that leadership styles influence employee creativity by fostering either a promotion or prevention focus. Our study addresses a notable gap in this paradigm by highlighting the critical role of the specific regulatory goals that leaders set for their followers. Traditional leadership models often overlook the exact nature of these regulatory goals, which are vital in both leadership and regulatory focus theory. LRGS serves as a crucial mechanism for defining leadership expectations in goal achievement. Our findings reveal that when leaders set maximal goals, they ignite a promotion focus in employees, prompting them to adopt eagerness strategies to attain gains, advancements, and ideals. This activation enhances intrinsic motivation, a fundamental catalyst for creative behavior. In contrast, setting minimal goals triggers a prevention focus, leading employees to adopt vigilant strategies to prevent losses, maintain security, and fulfill obligations, which tends to encourage conformity to leadership directives and, consequently, stifle creativity. The introduction of LRGS and the elucidation of these regulatory and motivational dynamics offer new insights into how leadership influences employee creativity.

While previous studies have explored the role of regulatory focus in leadership, they have not integrated the concept of regulatory goal setting. Drawing from Yukl's (2010) view of leadership as the strategic art of goal setting and pathway selection, we propose LRGS as a behavior where leaders actively set regulatory goals for their followers. We see LRGS as a dynamic, goal-driven activity that leaders use to shape their followers' regulatory focus. The concept of LRGS and the evidence we provide advances leadership theory by providing both theoretical grounding and empirical support for its incremental predictive validity. Our results show a direct and robust link between LRGS and employee regulatory focus and creativity, over and above the impact of traditional leadership models like transformational and transactional leadership. The distinct and immediate effect of LRGS on employee regulatory focus highlights its crucial role in enhancing employee creativity within the regulatory focus framework.

Our research also contributes to the goal-setting literature. According to goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham 2002), leaders who set specific and challenging goals can boost employee motivation and performance compared to vague or easy goals. Our findings suggest that, in addition to these goal characteristics, the type of regulatory goals set for employees—whether maximal or minimal—also plays a significant role. Maximal goals induce a promotion focus in employees, enhancing their intrinsic motivation and creativity, while minimal goals induce a prevention focus, increasing conformity to the leader and potentially stifling creativity.

Our research advances the regulatory focus literature by enhancing the understanding of how regulatory focus functions in goal pursuit. Regulatory focus theory posits that individuals navigate their goals via two distinct pathways: promotion and prevention (Higgins 1997, 1998). These pathways are characterized by pursuing either maximal or minimal goals and adopting corresponding strategies of eagerness or vigilance. Yet, prior research often conflates goals with strategies or focuses solely on the goals, muddling the connection between goal types and strategic approaches (e.g., Fellner et al. 2007; Higgins et al. 2001; Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda 2002; Neubert et al. 2008; Ouschan et al. 2007; Vriend et al. 2022). This confluence obscures the way in which different regulatory objectives shape strategic focus and, consequently, motivational states and behavior. Our framework clarifies this by outlining how leaders' regulatory goal setting—whether maximal or minimal—influences employees' regulatory focus—promotion or prevention. In doing so, we shed light on the interplay between leadership and employee regulatory focus, along with the resulting motivational and creative outcomes. Our insights provide a clearer perspective on the mechanisms through which leadership catalyzes creativity in the workplace.

Furthermore, regulatory focus is typically analyzed through an intrapersonal perspective, focusing on self-regulation (Gorman et al. 2012; Lanaj, Chang, and Johnson 2012). Our research, however, takes an interpersonal approach, proposing that the dynamics of regulatory focus can be imparted from leaders to employees. We show that leaders, as representatives of organizational objectives, set maximal or minimal goals for their employees. These goals then determine the regulatory goals and strategies that employees adopt, which in turn shape their specific motivational states and behaviors. This viewpoint adds depth to the research on the interpersonal effects of regulatory focus, resonating with studies that examine its wider relational influence (Henker, Sonnentag, and Unger 2015; Kark and Van Dijk 2007; Righetti, Finkenauer, and Rusbult 2011; Sue-Chan, Wood, and Latham 2012; Wu et al. 2008).

Our research also addresses a noted conceptual shortcoming in transformational leadership—a construct encompassing

idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass and Avolio 1994; Avolio and Bass 1991). Echoing van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013), we observe that transformational leadership's broad descriptors do not precisely articulate the factors and mechanisms through which leadership affects employee motivation and behavior. In response, LRGS specifies the regulatory goals leaders set for their followers, offering a coherent framework to detail the influence of leadership on followers' regulatory focus and creativity. This framework not only enriches the current discourse on leadership and regulatory focus but also heeds van Knippenberg and Sitkin's call for a more precise and empirically substantiated understanding of how leadership affects employee motivation and behavior.

Furthermore, our research offers a significant contribution to the creativity literature. Engaging employees in creative behavior is often challenging within organizational settings. Reflecting Ford (1996), employees typically lean toward habitual actions, which can overshadow creative pursuits. Leadership plays a pivotal role in nurturing a culture that values creativity and innovation. Our findings underscore the importance of LRGS as an influential mechanism for enhancing employee creativity. We demonstrate that leaders can steer employees toward creative activities by establishing maximal goals, aligning with promotion-focused strategies and intrinsic motivation as key drivers of creativity. This aligns with the principles of regulatory focus theory and self-determination theory, which suggest that the interplay between leadership-defined goals and employees' regulatory focus serves as a driving force for creative behavior.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, our study highlights the managerial importance of nurturing creativity in organizations, an essential factor for thriving in today's rapidly changing business world (e.g., Hughes et al. 2018; Reiter-Palmon, Mitchell, and Royston 2019; Shalley, Zhou, and Oldham 2004). We suggest that managers can significantly foster employee creativity by setting ambitious, maximal goals. These goals inspire employees to adopt promotion-oriented strategies, striving for achievements, progress, and high ideals, which in turn boosts their intrinsic motivation and creativity. However, leaders who prioritize minimal goals focused on avoiding losses, ensuring security, and meeting obligations may inhibit creativity. This approach can encourage employees to embrace prevention-oriented strategies, which often result in a tendency toward conformity and, consequently, a reduction in creative behavior. It is crucial for managers to recognize the potential for such an approach to stifle creativity, as it may cultivate a risk-averse, prevention-focused attitude among employees.

Furthermore, to elevate employee creativity, managers should actively foster a work environment that champions the pursuit of aspirations and ideals, indicative of a promotion-focused culture. Such an environment inherently nurtures intrinsic motivation, a fundamental ingredient for creativity, thus igniting the generation of creative ideas. However, in settings where rule compliance is essential, it may be prudent for leaders to establish minimal goals. This ensures that employees embrace prevention-focused strategies with diligence, adhering to established norms and leadership instructions.

8.2 | Limitations and Future Directions

While our research contributes valuable insights to both academic and practical domains, it is not without its limitations. Although our data collection in Study 2 spanned multiple organizations across various sectors, the importance of creativity—and consequently the application of LRGS—may differ based on organization-specific demands. Creativity is universally beneficial across all types of companies (Shalley, Gilson, and Blum 2000), yet the influence of LRGS on employee creativity could be contingent on the nature of work and the extent to which creativity is integrated into job roles. This variability warrants further investigation to understand how LRGS operates within different organizational contexts.

We also advocate for research that delves into the situational nuances and the adaptive aspects of LRGS. Future studies could employ methodologies that allow for a nuanced analysis of how leaders tailor maximal and minimal regulatory goals to suit diverse situations and individual employee traits. Methods such as diary studies could provide a temporal lens to observe the ebb and flow of LRGS's impact on employee motivation and creativity. Tracking these changes over time would not only corroborate and expand upon our current findings but also enrich the discourse on leadership's role in fostering creativity.

The time-lagged design of Study 2 constrains our ability to conclusively establish causality. LRGS and employees' regulatory focus were assessed concurrently at Time 1, with evaluations of employees' intrinsic motivation, conformity to the leader, and creativity occurring 3 months later at Time 2. While causality was inferred for the relationship between LRGS and employee regulatory focus in Study 1, our theoretical model posits a causal chain linking employee regulatory focus to specific motivational states and creative behavior. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the presence of alternative causal mechanisms. For instance, it is plausible that an employee's creative achievements could enhance their intrinsic motivation and inhibit their tendency to conform to the leader. To more definitively determine causal relationships, future studies should adopt a sequential measurement strategy. This would entail initially measuring leadership behaviors, followed by intermediary variables such as regulatory focus and motivational states, and ultimately, the outcome of creativity. Such temporal delineation would facilitate a more transparent analysis of the influence exerted by leadership on the mediators and, subsequently, on creativity. Moreover, the use of experimental and cross-lagged panel designs for the secondary relationships in our model could yield more robust causal evidence, allowing researchers to track changes over time and experimentally manipulate variables to assess the resulting impacts. The intricate dynamics observed in our study—spanning leader regulatory goals, employee regulatory focus, and context-specific motivation—indicate a sophisticated route through which leadership engenders creativity. By sequentially dissecting and scrutinizing these elements, we can attain a deeper comprehension of the underlying mechanisms. This systematic approach would not only confirm the effectiveness of LRGS but also clarify how leadership over time contributes to fostering creativity among employees.

Furthermore, in addition to the mediating roles of intrinsic motivation and conformity to leaders that we have identified, there may be other factors that elucidate the relationship between employees' regulatory focus and their creativity. Subsequent studies might explore the role of risk-taking propensity as a mediator, speculating that employees with a promotion focus may be more disposed to take risks in pursuit of maximal goals, which could, in turn, enhance creativity. On the other hand, a prevention focus might manifest as a motivation for safety (or risk aversion) during task execution, which could potentially inhibit creativity. Investigating these alternate mediators could yield a more nuanced comprehension of how regulatory focus strategies shape creativity in the workplace.

Our research on LRGS highlights the critical role of specifying regulatory goals that leaders set for their followers. However, the impact of LRGS may vary depending on the individual characteristics of employees. Based on regulatory fit theory (Higgins 2000, 2005), it is conceivable that the influence of LRGS on employees' regulatory focus depends on a congruence between leaders' goals and employees' inherent motivational strategies. In particular, maximal goals may better align with a chronic (dispositional) promotion focus, while minimal goals may better align with a chronic prevention focus. Furthermore, maximal goals may be particularly effective for individuals predisposed to creativity, characterized by traits such as openness to experience or creative self-efficacy (Vaughn, Baumann, and Klemann 2008). Exploring these nuances could reveal boundary conditions that refine our understanding of the effects of LRGS on creativity.

We also believe that employee prevention focus may not always negatively relate to creativity. It could be that the prevention focus-creativity relation depends on certain critical moderators. For example, a prevention focus does not seem to undermine creativity under imminent threat (Baas, De Dreu, and Nijstad 2011) or when creativity is functional to reach avoidance goals (Roskes, De Dreu, and Nijstad 2012). This is an issue that should be addressed in future research: what if creativity is necessary to avoid specific failures or to avert looming losses, and those specific actions are crucial to attain minimal goals set by the leader? Perhaps in these cases, leader minimal goals may stimulate rather than impede employee creativity.

9 | Conclusion

Drawing on regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997, 1998) and self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), our research underscores the pivotal role of LRGS in fostering employee creativity. Our findings indicate that leaders who establish maximal goals are more likely to enhance creativity among their employees, as opposed to those who focus on minimal goals, which may inhibit creative behavior. These relations persist even when controlling for the effects of transformational and transactional leadership styles. Furthermore, our research sheds light on the underlying mechanisms: maximal goals set by leaders stimulate creativity by fostering a promotion focus and bolstering intrinsic motivation among employees, whereas minimal goals reduce creativity by triggering a prevention focus and a tendency toward conformity. In essence, our research clarifies the relationship between LRGS and employee creativity, emphasizes its distinct predictive capacity, and affirms the importance of LRGS as an instrumental factor in cultivating creativity in organizational settings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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