

The mechanism of the influence of coaching leadership behavior on subordinate's sense of gain at work

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the mechanism of influence on the subordinate's sense of gain at work (SGW) in terms of the coaching leadership behavior (CL), supervisor-subordinate guanxi (SSG) and commitment-based practice of human resource management (CHRM).

Design/methodology/approach – Based on the survey of 584 employees from 50 firms operating in China, this study explores the effect of CL on employees' SGW, which concerns two dimensions: sense of material gain and sense of spiritual gain.

Findings – Results show that the CL has a significant positive influence on both the subordinate's sense of material gain and his/her sense of spiritual gain, in which there exists a mediating effect of SSG and moderating effects of CHRM for the influence.

Practical implications – This study not only develops the theory of SGW, but also provides a scientific basis and policy suggestions for employers to implement in order to enhance their employees' SGW.

Originality/value – Few integrative studies have examined the impact of CL on employees' SGW. Based on the Need-to-Belong Theory, this study adds new empirical evidence and constructs a theoretical model for the mechanism of influence on the SGW, examines the influence of CL on the subordinate's SGW and finds a mechanism of transmission (SSG) and a boundary condition (CHRM) for the influence.

Keywords Sense of gain at work, Coaching leadership behavior, Supervisor-subordinate guanxi, Commitment-based practice of human resource management, Need-to-belong theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Sense of Gain at Work (SGW) is a new indicator to measure employees' living standards (Zhu and Liu, 2020), which is used to reflect employees' subjective feelings about various benefits they obtain at work (Gu *et al.*, 2020). In 2015, president Xi Jinping of China first proposed the concept of "sense of gain" as an important evaluation standard to measure the effectiveness of China's reform and the level of people's livelihood. Subsequently, scholars such as Gu *et al.* (2020), Zhu and Liu (2020) incorporated it into the organizational context and derived the concept of SGW. Common indicators to measure employees' living standards also

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mainly include Quality of Working Life (QWL), Work Well-Being (WWB) and Job Satisfaction (JS). However, SGW is different from them. QWL focuses on the organizational perspective, reflecting the organization's attention to employees' living welfare and working environment (Grote and Guest, 2017); SGW focuses on the perspective of employees, reflecting employees' perception of organizational care (Zhu and Liu, 2020). WWB emphasizes the spiritual aspect and describes the positive emotional experience perceived by employees (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2018); SGW emphasizes material aspects and describes various gains perceived by employees (Gu *et al.*, 2020). JS mainly reflects the comparison between employees' expectations and gains (Spector, 2021), while SGW mainly reflects the comparison between employees' efforts and returns (Gu *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the SGW is also a new concept that deserves the common attention of scholars all over the world.

According to Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, workplace environment factors such as salary and benefits, organizational culture and interpersonal relationship are hygiene factors and the SGW is the subjective perception of these hygiene factors. Meanwhile, SGW includes a sense of material gain and a sense of spiritual gain (Zheng, 2017). The sense of material gain refers to the employees' sense of gain in material aspects such as salary, benefits and basic life support, while the sense of spiritual gain refers to the employees' sense of gain in spiritual aspects such as organizational culture, colleague relationships and self-worth (Gu *et al.*, 2020). According to self-interest theory and utility theory, everyone pursues the maximization of their own interests. Therefore, it is a basic need for employees to pursue more SGW in the organizational context. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, the sense of material gain belongs to the lower level of needs (e.g. physiological needs and safety needs), while the sense of spiritual gain belongs to the higher level of needs (e.g. esteem and actualization of personal value).

In recent years, the research on SGW has attracted much attention. Previous studies focused on exploring the connotation (Zhu and Liu, 2020), dimensions (Zheng, 2017) and measurement tools (Gu *et al.*, 2020) of the SGW, while empirical studies on the mechanism of influence on the SGW is still very few. In organizations, Coaching Leadership Behavior (CL) is a positive leadership behavior (Ellinger and Bostrom, 1999) that influences the subordinate's feelings, attitudes and behaviors at work by guidance, facilitation and inspiration (Heslin *et al.*, 2006), which can induce employees' job satisfaction (Kalkavan and Katrinli, 2014). Hence, this study will investigate mechanisms of the influence on the employees' SGW from the perspective of CL.

According to the Need-to-Belong Theory, the need to belong is a fundamental type of human motivation for maintaining the most basic social bonds (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and one of the most basic motivational needs of members within an organization (Fiske, 2019). A good Supervisor-Subordinate Guanxi (SSG) is an important condition for employees to develop a sense of belonging and to satisfy their need to belong (Law *et al.*, 2000). The positive coaching behavior of leaders is conducive to the development of a good SSG, thus satisfying the subordinate's need to belong and ultimately enhancing their positive experiences (e.g. SGW). With SSG as a mediator, this study further examines the indirect influence of CL on the subordinate's SGW. Furthermore, the Commitment-based practice of Human Resource Management (CHRM) is a management model that aims to enhance the employees' sense of identity and belonging (Wood and Albanese, 1995; Borrott *et al.*, 2016). It may influence the employees' need to belong together with the CL. Therefore, this study will both explore the mediation effect of SSG and the moderation effect of the CHRM in this mechanism of influence.

Theoretical basis and hypotheses

CL and the subordinate's SGW

CL is a positive leadership behavior (Ellinger and Bostrom, 1999) that often helps the subordinate to accomplish goals (Grant and Hartley, 2013). It influences the subordinate's

feelings and attitudes at work by guidance, facilitation and inspiration (Heslin *et al.*, 2006). Guidance refers to the communication of clear performance expectations and constructive feedback regarding performance outcomes, as well as how to improve. Facilitation refers to helping employees to analyze and explore ways to solve problems and enhance their performance, and inspiration refers to challenging employees to realize and develop their potential (Orth *et al.*, 1987). SGW is an individual's comprehensive feeling and evaluation of the actual reward and value realization in work, including a sense of material gain and a sense of spiritual gain (Zhu and Liu, 2020). On the material level, employees can feel the improvement of material living standard (e.g. income, pension and medical insurance). On the spiritual level, employees have ideals and pursuits, live a more dignified life and enjoy equal rights fairly (Zheng, 2017).

According to the Need-to-Belong Theory, individuals have an inclination to form and sustain pleasant and favorable social bonds, and pursue achievement in this process (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). The leader facilitates the subordinate in achieving work goals by exercising diverse coaching behaviors (Grant and Hartley, 2013), thereby satisfying the subordinate's need for achievement and reinforcing their sense of organizational belonging, which can further enhance the subordinate's SGW (Gu *et al.*, 2020). First, the leader's guidance behavior can communicate clear performance expectations and constructive feedback regarding performance outcomes, as well as how to improve their work performance (Kim, 2014), thus enhancing their sense of achievement and SGW. Second, the facilitation behavior can give active resources and support to the subordinate and create a positive atmosphere for organizational communication (Evered and Selman, 1989), thus improving job satisfaction and SGW. Finally, the inspiration behavior can enhance the subordinate's self-confidence and make them willing to accept various challenges at work (Heslin and Latham, 2004), thus challenging them to realize their self-worth and heighten their SGW.

Meanwhile, the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) holds that the characteristics of all jobs can be classified into two categories: job demands and job resources (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Among them, supervisor support and other job resources are "positive factors" in work and they can promote personal growth and development (Llorens *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, CL provides supervisor support to subordinates through guidance, facilitation and inspiration, and also helps to promote the formation of subordinates' SGW. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

- H1. CL positively influences the subordinate's sense of material gain.
- H2. CL positively influences the subordinate's sense of spiritual gain.

The mediating role of SSG

SSG is a typical organizational relationship (Law *et al.*, 2000) that can reflect the emotional interaction between supervisor and subordinate (Cheung *et al.*, 2009; Wei *et al.*, 2010). The concepts reflecting the relationship between leaders and subordinates mainly include Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and SSG. LMX puts more emphasis on the "relationship" between leaders and subordinates in the workplace, while SSG focuses more on the "guanxi" between leaders and employees outside the workplace, that is, closer personal friendship outside the work (Law *et al.*, 2000). CL is easy to make leaders have intimate relationship with their subordinates (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and the relationship can easily extend from within the workplace to outside the workplace. Therefore, SSG is selected as the mediator in this study.

The mediating role of LMX between leadership behavior and employee perception has been confirmed (Bernerth, 2020), which lays a foundation for exploring the mediating role of SSG in coaching leadership behavior and subordinates' SGW. On the one hand, according to

the Need-to-Belong Theory, organizational members have an inclination to form and sustain close relationships of mutual support and trust, and the maintenance of such relationships leads to positive work attitudes and behaviors in employees (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). By coaching leadership behavior such as guidance, facilitation and inspiration, employees can feel care, identity and respect in the organization. This can enhance the subordinate's trust in the supervisor and recognition of the organization, satisfy their need to belong, enhance SSG and stimulate positive feelings in employees (Rhoades *et al.*, 2001). On the other hand, according to the reciprocity principle, when subordinates are guided, facilitated and inspired, they will be grateful to their supervisor and organization, and will take positive actions to enhance the guanxi with their supervisor and the return for their organization (Wong *et al.*, 2010), thus having positive experience (e.g. sense of belonging) and enhancing their SGW. The better such guanxi is, the smoother the emotional exchange between them and the easier for the subordinate to feel positive emotions (Chen and Aryee, 2007). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

- H3. SSG has a mediating effect between coaching leadership behavior and the subordinate's sense of material gain.
- H4. SSG has a mediating effect between coaching leadership behavior and the subordinate's sense of spiritual gain.

The moderating role of CHRM

Organizations are attaching an increasing degree of importance to improving organizational commitment and reducing employee turnover. Hence, the CHRM is emerging (Su and Wright, 2012). This practice is a management model that aims to facilitate the growth of employees, thus enhancing their commitment to the organization (Chiang *et al.*, 2011). Empirical studies proved that the CHRM as an organizational context can facilitate positive perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in employees (Arthur, 1994; Kuvaas and Dysvik, 2010). It is also generally accepted that this practice is the best management model for enhancing employee outcomes (Gould-Williams, 2004; Farndale *et al.*, 2011), because it can enhance employees' satisfaction and trust in the organization and create a sense of identity to the organization.

In organizations, the higher the level of CHRM, the more employees are committed to the organization (Walton, 1985), the better the leader can communicate clear performance expectations and constructive feedback regarding performance outcomes, help employees to analyze and explore ways to solve problems and enhance their work performance, and employees develop their potential and challenge themselves, thus ensuring long-term and orderly relationships between leader and employees (Chiang *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

- H5. CHRM positively moderates the relationship between CL and SSG.

Similarly, a high commitment-based human resource management model can enhance the employees' SGW by improving management effectiveness and integrating corporate resources, so that employees identify with organizational goals and strive to accomplish them (Wood and Menezes, 1998). From the perspective of employees, the high CHRM model can improve their sense of trust (Farndale *et al.*, 2011), their sense of organizational support (Allen *et al.*, 2003) and JS (Ang *et al.*, 2013), enhance their sense of belonging to the organization and further heighten their SGW. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

- H6. CHRM positively moderates the relationship between CL and the subordinate's sense of material gain.

H7. CHRM positively moderates the relationship between CL and the subordinate's sense of spiritual gain.

In summary, the theoretical model of this study is presented in Figure 1.

Methodology

Scale optimization of SGW

In this study, the SGW scale developed by Gu et al. (2020) was used, which has two dimensions, the sense of material gain (5 items) and the sense of spiritual gain (9 items). The scale is a relatively mature tool for measuring SGW in the field of organizational management. However, in the pre-test, there was a phenomenon of cross-factor in the items of this scale. Moreover, the optimal number of items in each dimension was 4–6 (Hinkin, 2005), indicating that there were too many items in the sense of spiritual gain. Therefore, we optimized the SGW scale of Gu et al. (2020).

Through an exploratory factor analysis of 289 valid questionnaires, two common factors were extracted. The following three items were eliminated: factor loading is less than 0.500 in all factors of items and factor loading is greater than or equal to 0.400 in two or more factors (cross-factor) (Floyd and Widaman, 1995). The cumulative percentage of explanation increased from 67.19% to 68.86%. Afterward, AMOS 24.0 software was applied for confirmatory factor analysis, and it was found that the overall model fitting of the optimized SGW scale was relatively satisfying ($\chi^2/df = 2.765 < 3$, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.078 < 0.08, standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = 0.033 < 0.05, goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.928 > 0.90, normed fit index (NFI) = 0.943 > 0.90, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.963 > 0.90, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.962 > 0.90, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) or Non-normed fit index (NNFI) = 0.952 > 0.90) (Browne and Cudeck, 1992; Byrne, 2001). As shown in Figure 2, the results illustrated that the standardized factor loading coefficients of all observable variables on corresponding latent variables were greater than 0.70, and were all significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the scale had good convergent validity.

After optimization, the SGW scale had 11 items in total. There were five items for the sense of material gain dimension, namely “I am satisfied with my employer’s salary level”, “I am satisfied with my employer’s benefit level”, “I am satisfied with my employer’s pension security”, “I am satisfied with my employer’s housing security” and “I am satisfied with my employer’s medical security”. There were 6 items for the sense of spiritual gain dimension, namely “I have a good mood working in this company”, “My employer has good rules and regulations that are strictly enforced”, “I am satisfied with my employer’s culture”, “I am satisfied with the relationship among colleagues that my employer has been able to establish”, “I am satisfied with my employer’s leisure activities”, and “I am satisfied with my employer’s awareness and efficiency of service to employees”.

Data collection

In the formal survey, 624 paper questionnaires were distributed to nearly 50 companies in Chengdu, China, and all of them were collected on the spot. After screening, there were 584

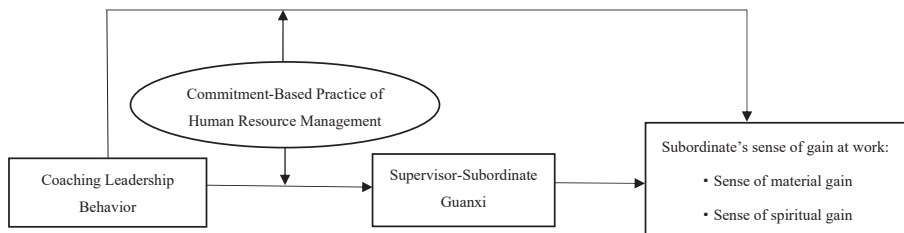


Figure 1.
The theoretical model

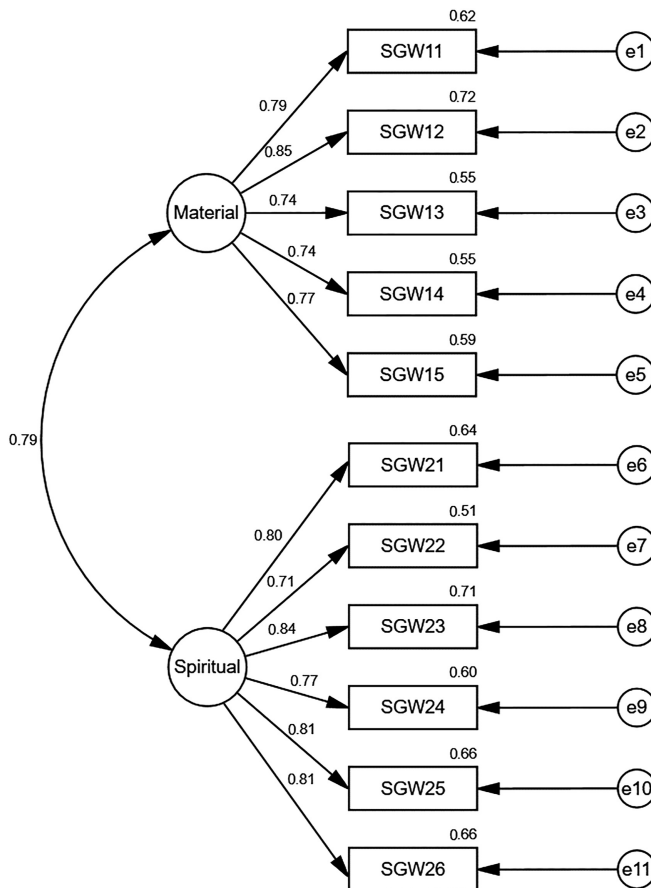


Figure 2. Standardized path diagram for two-dimensional structural equation model of SGW

valid questionnaires, with a valid response rate of 93.6%. For the valid data: in terms of gender, females accounted for 61.8%; in terms of age, the respondents were mainly under 35, accounting for 74.3%; in terms of education, they were mainly college and university graduates, which accounted for 38.6% and 37.5%, respectively; in terms of job tenure, most of them had worked for 3–5 years, accounting for 28.3%; in terms of job grade, 40.9% of them were lowest management or held junior job positions; and in terms of company type, most of them were working in private firms, accounting for 71.6%.

Measures

All items in the study were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (e.g. 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The reliability, validity and factor analysis of the scale of each variable and the whole questionnaire were conducted to eliminate abnormal items. Finally, the remaining items were summarized into a formal questionnaire.

CL. This variable was measured by the scale developed by [Heslin et al. \(2006\)](#). It consists of 10 items, and a sample item is “Help you to analyze your performance?” One item with low

reliability was deleted in the pretest, namely "Provide guidance regarding performance expectations?" Therefore, the purified scale consisted of 9 items ($\alpha = 0.962$).

SGW. This variable was measured by the 11-item SGW scale optimized in this study ($\alpha = 0.932$), including two dimensions of a sense of material gain and a sense of spiritual gain. There were five items for the sense of material gain, and a sample item is "I am satisfied with my employer's salary level" ($\alpha = 0.890$). And there were 6 items for the sense of spiritual gain with a sample item namely "I have a good mood working in this company" ($\alpha = 0.921$).

SSG. This variable was measured by the 6-item SSG scale developed by Law *et al.* (2000). A sample item is "During holidays or after office hours, I would call my supervisor or visit him/her." In the pretest, one item with low reliability was deleted, namely "I always actively share my thoughts, problems, needs and feelings with my supervisor". Finally, only five items were used ($\alpha = 0.877$).

CHRM. This variable was measured by the 10-item scale developed by Xiao and Tsui (2007). A sample item is "The firm provides careful selection procedures in recruiting". In the pretest, one item with low reliability was deleted, namely "The employee has extensive ownership of shares, options or profit sharing". Finally, only 9 items were used ($\alpha = 0.890$).

The control variables include: age, gender, education, job tenure, job grade and company type.

Results

In order to test the discriminant validity of the variables, Amos 24.0 software was used. In Table 1, the goodness of fit index of the five-factor model ($\chi^2 = 1,865.390$, $df = 517$, $\chi^2/df = 3.608$, $RMSEA = 0.067$, $CFI = 0.913$, $TLI = 0.906$, $SRMR = 0.043$) was significantly better than those of other models. It meant that these five variables have good discriminant validity. We also applied the common-method variance (CMV) to construct a six-factor model and compared it with the measurement model (see Table 1) (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The results indicated that compared with the measurement model (five-factor model), the six-factor model added with the CMV had a lower chi-square value (χ^2), an increase in CFI and TLI less than 0.1 ($\Delta CFI = 0.026$, $\Delta TLI = 0.023$) and a decrease in RMSEA and SRMR less than 0.05 ($\Delta RMSEA = 0.009$, $\Delta SRMR = 0.010$). Therefore, the measurement model of this study does not have a serious common method bias.

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all the variables of this study are displayed in Table 2.

SPSS 21.0 software and hierarchical regression was used to test the main effects, and the results are shown in Table 3. The CL has a significantly positive influence on the sense of material gain ($\beta = 0.635$, $p < 0.001$) and the sense of spiritual gain ($\beta = 0.647$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, both H1 and H2 are supported.

The Bootstrap method (Hayes, 2017) was used to test the mediating effect: Model 4 was selected, the sample size was set to 5,000 with 95% confidence intervals and the bias-corrected nonparametric percentile method was selected for sampling. The mediating effect was significant if the upper and lower limits of the confidence interval did not contain 0. Therefore, there is a significant mediating effect of SSG between CL and the subordinate's sense of material gain, and H3 is supported ($\beta = 0.087$, $p < 0.001$); the mediating effect is insignificant between CL and the subordinate's sense of spiritual gain, and H4 is not supported ($\beta = 0.015$, $p > 0.05$).

In addition, structural equation model (SEM) was further used to verify the main effect and the mediating effect. It has good fitting in the assumed model: $\chi^2/df = 4.713$, $RMSEA = 0.080$, $SRMR = 0.069$, $IFI = 0.919$, $CFI = 0.919$, and $TLI = 0.910$. Both H1 and H2 are further supported ($\gamma_1 = 0.606$, $p < 0.001$; $\gamma_2 = 0.679$, $p < 0.001$). In order to verify the mediating effect, the goodness of fit between the assumed model and the alternative complete

Model	χ^2	$\Delta\chi^2$	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
M0: measurement model (five factors)	1,865.390	-	517	3.608	0.067	0.913	0.906	0.043
M1: four factors (CL + SSG)	2,747.192	881.802***	521	5.273	0.086	0.857	0.846	0.061
M2: three factors (CL + SSG + CHRM)	3,500.779	753.587***	524	6.681	0.099	0.809	0.795	0.075
M3: two factors (CL + SSG + CHRM + SGW1)	4,297.900	797.121***	526	8.171	0.111	0.757	0.741	0.084
M4: single factor (CL + SSG + CHRM + SGW1 + SGW2)	5,310.574	1,012.674***	527	10.077	0.125	0.692	0.673	0.089
M5: five factors + CMV	1,438.375	-427.015	483	2.978	0.058	0.939	0.929	0.033

Note(s): a. *** $p < 0.001$; SGW1 = sense of material gain, SGW2 = sense of spiritual gain; b. RMSEA = Root-mean-square error of approximation, CFI = Comparative fit index, TLI = Tucker-Lewis index, SRMR = Standardized root-mean-square residual.

Table 1.
Results of
confirmatory factor
analysis

mediation model (deleting the direct paths of CL to SGW) were compared. The results of SEM are shown in Table 4. The assumed model is significantly better than the alternative complete mediation model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 329.673, \Delta df = 2, p < 0.001$). Therefore, the assumed model is the optimal model. The direct impact (H1) and indirect impact of the CL on the sense of material gain ($\gamma_{ab} = 0.091, p < 0.001$) are significant, and H3 is further supported; the direct impact of CL on the sense of spiritual gain (H2) is significant, the indirect impact ($p > 0.05$) is not significant, and H4 is not supported.

As shown in Table 5, the CHRM does not have a significant moderating effect between CL and SSG ($\beta = 0.069, p > 0.05$) and H5 is not supported. Similarly, the CHRM has a significant moderating effect between CL and the subordinate's sense of material gain ($\beta = 0.085, p < 0.01$) and H6 is supported; the CHRM has a significant moderating effect between CL and the subordinate's sense of spiritual gain ($\beta = 0.106, p < 0.01$) and H7 is supported. In order to further analyze the moderation effect of CHRM, we used the PROCESS program developed by Hayes (2017) and corresponded to the moderating effect graph. In the process (M±1SD) test, for organizations with high and low levels of CHRM, the CL has a significant and positive

Table 2.
Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1.CL	3.9648	0.81466	(0.962)				
2.SGW1	3.6682	0.82355	0.643**	(0.890)			
3.SGW2	4.0442	0.69095	0.647**	0.697**	(0.921)		
4.SSG	3.1781	0.99773	0.552**	0.467**	0.376**	(0.877)	
5.CHRM	3.9694	0.66560	0.707**	0.631**	0.658**	0.505**	(0.890)

Note(s): a. ** $p < 0.01$; SGW1 = sense of material gain, SGW2 = sense of spiritual gain; b. Cronbach's alphas are presented on the diagonal in the brackets

Table 3.
Results of main effects testing

	Sense of material gain		Sense of spiritual gain	
	M1	M2	M3	M4
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Gender	-0.087*	-0.049	-0.008	0.031
Age	0.134*	0.047	0.143*	0.055
Education	-0.105*	-0.047	-0.076	-0.017
Job tenure	-0.085	0.030	-0.128*	-0.011
Job grade	0.001	0.009	-0.031	-0.023
Company type	0.066	0.036	0.016	-0.015
<i>Independent Variable</i>				
CL		0.635***		0.647***
R ²	0.035	0.425	0.018	0.423
ΔR^2	0.035	0.390	0.018	0.405
F	3.441**	60.716***	1.745	60.250***

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$; CL = coaching leadership behavior

Table 4.
Confirmatory factor analysis results of two models

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	RMSEA	SRMR	IFI	CFI	TLI
Assumed	1272.586	270	4.713	0.080	0.069	0.919	0.919	0.910
Alternative	1602.259	272	5.891	0.092	0.151	0.893	0.893	0.882

predictive effect on the subordinate's sense of material gain ($\beta_{\text{High}} = 0.498, p < 0.001$; $\beta_{\text{Low}} = 0.358, p < 0.001$) and his/her sense of spiritual gain ($\beta_{\text{High}} = 0.417, p < 0.001$; $\beta_{\text{Low}} = 0.270, p < 0.001$), so H6 and H7 are further supported. The moderating effect is shown in Figure 3 (with H6 as an example).

The test results and final model of this study are presented in Figure 4.

Discussion

Conclusions

Based on the Need-to-Belong Theory, the mechanism of influence of CL on the subordinate's SGW was systematically investigated. Results show that: CL has a positive facilitation effect on the subordinate's sense of material gain and his/her sense of spiritual gain. The SSG has a partial mediating effect between CL and the subordinate's sense of material gain, but without a significant mediating effect between CL and his/her sense of spiritual gain. One possible explanation is this: the sense of spiritual gain mainly tests the rules and regulations, service awareness and leisure activities at the organizational level (Gu et al., 2020), but the SSG, which is less closely related to these aspects, cannot transmit the influence of CL on the subordinate's sense of spiritual gain. In addition, the CHRM positively moderates the relationship between CL and the subordinate's sense of material gain and his/her sense of spiritual gain, but it did not have a significant moderation effect on the relationship between CL and SSG.

Theoretical significance

Firstly, the concept of SGW was extended. There are many concepts describing employees' living standards, such as quality of working life, work well-being and job satisfaction, but the SGW is essentially different from them. Compared with the quality of working life, the SGW focuses more on the perspective of employees (Grote and Guest, 2017). Compared with work well-being, SGW emphasizes the subjective feeling of objective acquisition (Oerlemans and Bakker, 2018). Compared with job satisfaction, SGW can better reflect the comparison between employees' efforts and returns (Spector, 2021). Therefore, this paper is conducive to

Variables	Supervisor-subordinate guanxi M1	Sense of material gain M2	Sense of spiritual gain M3
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Gender	-0.119***	-0.032	0.051
Age	-0.049	0.040	0.047
Education	0.014	-0.023	0.011
Job tenure	0.047	0.042	0.003
Job grade	-0.003	0.006	-0.027
Company type	0.018	0.039	-0.013
<i>Independent Variable</i>			
CL	0.419***	0.424***	0.405***
<i>Moderator</i>			
CHRM	0.225***	0.352***	0.408***
<i>Interaction Term</i>			
CL × CHRM	0.069	0.085**	0.106**

Table 5. Regression analysis of the moderating effect

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; SGW1 = sense of material gain, SGW2 = sense of spiritual gain

Figure 3.
The moderating effect
of CHRM on the
relationship between
CL and SGW1

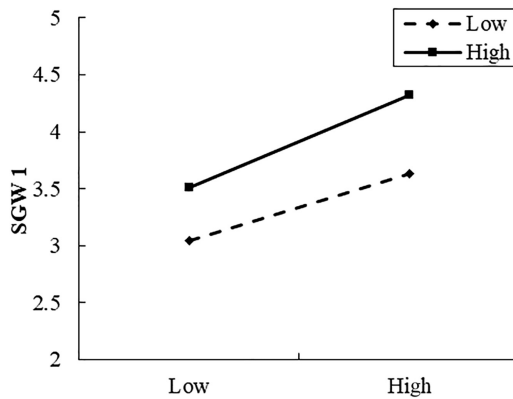
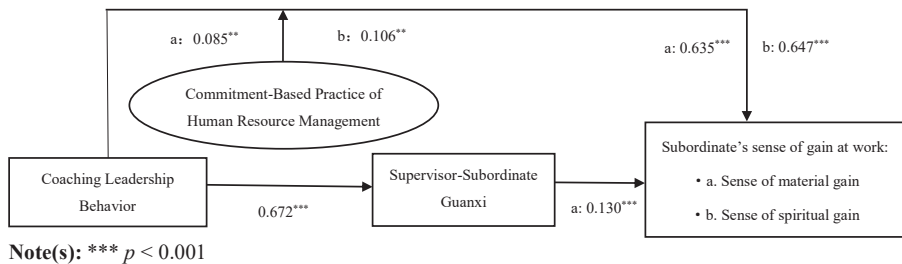


Figure 4.
The model test results



the promotion of the concept of SGW, and expects scholars from all countries to study it in different cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, the SGW scale was optimized. Measurement tools are the basis of empirical research. The research on the SGW is just in its infancy, and the measurement tools need to be further developed and improved (Zhu and Liu, 2020), so we optimized the SGW scale developed by Gu et al. (2020) and provided a shorter tool with better construct validity. Through exploratory factor analysis, we first eliminated the items whose loading was less than 0.500 in all factors, and then eliminated the items whose loading was greater than or equal to 0.400 in two or more factors (cross-factor) (Floyd and Widaman, 1995), thus eliminating 3 items and making the items more concise. Finally, the sense of material gain (5 items) and sense of spiritual gain (6 items) were obtained, and the cumulative percentage of explanation of the overall scale increased from 67.19% to 68.86%. Cronbach's α values in both the pre-test and the formal survey were greater than 0.9, indicating that the data had good validity.

Thirdly, the research perspective for the SGW was expanded. Previous studies mainly explored the paths to enhancing the SGW at the organizational and individual levels. From the organizational level, positive job characteristics and organizational support will make employees have the SGW. The realization of material and spiritual incentives in management and the improvement of salary and promotion systems are conducive to improving employees' SGW (Zhu and Liu, 2020). From the individual level, when the individual's social status is lower, the social support is less, the relative deprivation is stronger and the sense of gain is lower (Zheng, 2017). However, most researches have ignored the influence of leader's positive behavior on subordinates' SGW. We further analyzed from the leadership perspective and investigated the influence of CL and SSG on the SGW.

Finally, a theoretical model was constructed for the mechanism of influence on the SGW. In the previous studies, there are few empirical articles using classical theories to study the SGW. Based on the Need-to-Belong Theory (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), we examined the mechanism of influence of CL on the subordinate's SGW and found a mechanism of transmission SSG and a boundary condition CHRM for the influence. Leaders provide guidance, facilitation and inspiration to help employees save time, improve efficiency and achieve better work performance (Liu and Batt, 2010; Kim, 2014), so as to enhance the sense of gain of employees. In the process of leaders providing support to his/her subordinates, their emotional exchanges increase, the relationship between leaders and subordinates is strengthened and subordinates will be more likely to have positive job feelings (Wong *et al.*, 2010), such as the SGW. In addition, the implementation of high CHRM can increase management effectiveness and integration of enterprise resources, improving employees' JS (Ang *et al.*, 2013) and the SGW.

Practical implications

During the transformation and change of many organizations, senior managers have made a lot of exploration and efforts to improve the quality of working life of employees (Grote and Guest, 2017). These explorations and efforts provide more benefits to employees, but the effect is not ideal, or even counterproductive. One of the core problems is that employees do not perceive these increased benefits (e.g. objective gain). This perceived benefit is the sense of gain. Compared with gain, perceived gain has a greater and more direct impact on employees (Brower *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, in the process of organizational change and transformation, we should not only pay attention to the amount of gain given to employees, but also take measures to improve employees' perception of gain. No perception or low degree of perception may be due to the influence of leadership style, superior-subordinate relationship and human resource management practice. If these factors are not used properly, it will greatly reduce employees' perception of gain. Thus, we explore how to improve employees' perception of gain at work through these three aspects, that is, to build a multi-level mechanism to improve the SGW:

Firstly, motivating CL. First, firms should strengthen the construction of coaching organizations and the coaching culture, motivate the leader to have various kinds of coaching behavior (guidance, facilitation and inspiration) and further enhance the employee's sense of belonging to the organization and his/her sense of gain at work. Second, leadership must be enhanced, and leaders must be enabled to improve their ability to guide and inspire their subordinates by training and other means. Finally, firms should incorporate coaching leadership behavior into the assessment of leaders or promptly confirm and reward leaders who exhibit coaching leadership behavior.

Secondly, facilitating SSG. First, we must promptly identify and resolve conflicts between supervisor and subordinate. If a conflict arises with any supervisor, the subordinate's sense of belonging will drop rapidly and this may even lead to resignation. Organizations should know clearly about SSG (particularly core employees) and intervene in time to resolve the conflict between them. Second, a platform must be built for establishing harmonious SSG. Communication between supervisor and subordinate may be strengthened by organizing leisure activities or collective training programs, such as extended training, may also be organized to facilitate understanding between supervisor and subordinate. At this time, the SGW of subordinates can be aroused.

Thirdly, improving CHRM. First of all, the high CHRM provides employees with participation opportunities, fair and flexible salary system, etc (Su and Wright, 2012), which makes employees feel supported by the organization. And it meets the needs of physiology, safety, esteem, self-actualization, etc., contributing to the formation of the SGW. Hence, it

should be strictly implemented and carried out in the enterprise. Next, organizations must emphasize the construction and transmission of an organizational culture, must build a system for the evaluation of team performance and innovate a flexible job design. Finally, organizations must focus on employee participation and information sharing, attach importance to knowledge and skill training of employees and make practices of human resource management fuller.

Limitations and outlook

There are shortcomings and inadequacies that need to be validated and improved by future studies.

Firstly, measurement tools for the SGW may be further developed. Although the SGW scale proposed by Gu et al.(2020) was optimized in this study, it still has the shortcoming that was not rooted enough in organizational contexts. In the future, the grounded theory and case study may be utilized to develop more accurate and applicable measurement tools grounded in local culture and organizational contexts.

Secondly, a multilevel study may be designed. The theoretical model involves the variables at the levels of organization, leadership and employees but we explored only at the employee level. In the future, a multilevel study could be designed and supervisor-subordinate pairing data could be used.

Finally, the theoretical model could be validated in different cultural and economic contexts. In order to ensure data quality, we adhered to the face-to-face paper questionnaires, but due to limited conditions and resources, the samples were selected only from China. In the future, the findings of this study could be validated and improved in different countries or multicultural contexts.

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