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# Embracing Creative Nonconformists and Promoting Them May Require Leaders' High Control Appraisals

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## ABSTRACT

Promoting creative employees is essential to innovation and organizational success. However, leaders do not always embrace the nonconformist nature of creative behaviors. This study examines how leaders' control appraisals—a personal orientation reflecting their belief in their own ability to control situations—influence their receptiveness and support in evaluating the promotability of creative employees. Drawing on theories of interpersonal trust, we posit that even when employees exhibit creative behavior, their leaders may not always develop emotional bonds (affect-based trust) with them because of the unpredictability and risk associated with their nonconformist nature. In particular, we suggest that leaders with higher control appraisals are more likely to form affect-based trust in their creative employees and promote them. Our findings ( $n = 812$ ) obtained with multiple methods (i.e., a multi-wave survey and a business simulation experiment) support our theoretical model. Our study offers important implications for theory and practice and identifies avenues for future research on the promotion of creative employees.

## 1 | Introduction

In today's fast-paced and competitive business environment, organizations increasingly rely on employees' creative behavior, namely, the generation of novel and useful ideas (Amabile 1983; George and Zhou 2001), to maintain a sustainable competitive edge (Byron et al. 2023; Chen et al. 2018; Shin and Zhou 2007). As a result, leaders often strategically promote creative employees to key positions, a practice that not only enhances these employees' job satisfaction and self-esteem (Ng et al. 2005; Tan and Peng 1997) but also enables organizations to better leverage their creative potential to foster innovation and organizational success (Rodrigues and Rebelo 2023). Reflecting this view, research has shown that leaders typically interpret creative behaviors as evidence of employees' competence, initiative, and commitment to organizational success, thus increasing their promotability (Guillén and Kunze 2019; Rodrigues and Rebelo 2023;

Seibert et al. 2001). This consensus is deeply rooted in contest mobility theory (Miller et al. 2005; Turner 1960), which frames promotion decisions as meritocratic contests where employees who demonstrate exceptional performance, including creativity, are fast-tracked into leadership roles. From this perspective, creativity is a core indicator of promotability, reinforcing the widespread idea that employees who excel in creative endeavors naturally climb the hierarchical ladder.

However, an alternative perspective in the career advancement literature, sponsor mobility theory (Turner 1960), suggests that promotion depends not only on individual merit but also on a leader's willingness to sponsor and personally endorse an employee's upward mobility. From this perspective, the relationship between creative behavior and promotability becomes more complex. Creativity's inherently nonconformist nature, reflected in employees' willingness to challenge norms, take risks,

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and deviate from established practices (Grant 2017; Tierney et al. 1999), can introduce uncertainty and risk for leaders when making promotion decisions. For instance, Venkataramani et al. (2024) found that leaders may perceive creative employees as a threat to their authority or team harmony. Similarly, Mueller et al. (2011) demonstrated that uncertainty surrounding novel ideas can reduce the perception of leadership potential. These findings challenge the common idea that creativity and career advancement are universally aligned, suggesting instead that this relationship is contingent on leaders' subjective evaluations of the benefits and risks associated with nonconformity. Despite these complexities, research has largely overlooked how leaders' psychological dispositions, particularly their perception of their ability to manage uncertainty and build trust, shape their evaluations of creative employees. Therefore, we explore why and under what conditions creative employees are viewed as promotable.

To address this question, we draw on theories of interpersonal trust (Mayer et al. 1995; McAllister 1995) to examine the relationship between employees' creative behavior and their promotability via leaders' affect-based trust, a form of trust grounded in emotional bonds and mutual care, rather than purely cognitive assessments of competence. While valuable, employees' creative behaviors introduce unpredictability, making leaders vulnerable to risks such as team disruption or initiative failure (Grant 2017; Venkataramani et al. 2024). Promotion decisions inherently involve uncertainty about employees' future performance in higher roles, creating a need for leaders to mitigate these risks through trust (Colquitt et al. 2012; Rousseau et al. 1998). Affect-based trust mitigates such vulnerabilities by fostering a form of security rooted in emotional bonds and benevolent intent. While cognition-based trust ensures that an employee can act in the organization's best interests based on their competence and reliability, affect-based trust reinforces the belief that the employee will do so out of emotional connection and mutual care, even when their behavior deviates from existing norms (McAllister 1995).<sup>1</sup> This affective dimension is particularly important for managing relational uncertainties associated with nonconformity.

Critically, employees' creative behavior reflects two aspects: on the one hand, it demonstrates employees' willingness to go beyond their prescribed role and contribute proactively to their workgroup's success (Van Scotter et al. 2000); on the other hand, it involves challenging the status quo and deviating from established norms, which may introduce uncertainty (Grant 2017). Therefore, we argue that creativity does not automatically lead to leaders' affect-based trust. Instead, this relationship depends on leaders' subjective appraisals of their ability to manage uncertainty. These *control appraisals*—leaders' beliefs in their own ability to influence outcomes and address challenges (Parker et al. 2006)—shape whether creativity is perceived as an asset or a threat. Leaders with high control appraisals are more likely to view creativity as a manageable and beneficial quality, fostering trust and increasing promotability. In contrast, leaders with low control appraisals may see creativity as a destabilizing risk, undermining trust and reducing the likelihood of promotability. This moderated mediation framework challenges the conventional wisdom that creativity's value is self-evident, instead positioning leaders' psychological dispositions as pivotal

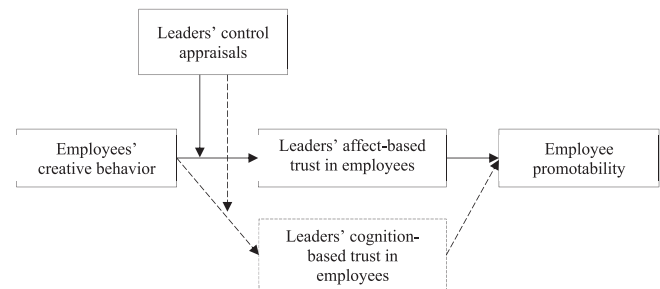
filters shaping promotion outcomes. Our theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

We first tested the overall trust-mediated model of promotability in a multi-wave field study of 266 leader–employee dyads to establish its external validity. We then replicated our findings in a business simulation experiment with 546 participants to support our causal inference. Our study makes three key contributions. First, we challenge the widespread idea that creative behaviors are simple indicators of promotability, arguing instead that evaluations must balance their innovative potential against the risks of nonconformity (e.g., Guillén and Kunze 2019; Mueller et al. 2011). Second, we extend the trust-based promotability model, which has traditionally focused on the implications of cognition-based trust, leaders' rational evaluations of employees' competence and reliability (Colquitt et al. 2012; Schaubroeck et al. 2011). In contrast, we emphasize the importance of leaders' affect-based trust, grounded in emotional bonds and mutual care, as a critical factor in their assessments of creative employees' promotability. Third, we reveal how leaders' control appraisals shape their evaluations: leaders who strongly believe in their ability to manage creative risks are more likely to develop affect-based trust in response to employees' creative behaviors, leading to favorable promotability judgments. This study advances the theory by identifying the conditions under which creative employees are viewed as promotable and offers practical insights for organizations to consider leaders' dispositions in succession strategies.

## 2 | Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1 | Leaders' Evaluations of Creative Employees' Promotability

Evaluations of the promotability of creative employees are pivotal and serve as critical junctions for both individual career trajectories and organizational development. From the perspective of creative employees, a favorable evaluation can open up career advancement opportunities (Van Scotter et al. 2000), greater job satisfaction (Ng et al. 2005), and improved self-esteem (Tan and Peng 1997). From an organizational perspective, promoting these innovative minds can invigorate the entire organization, propelling it toward greater innovation (Anderson et al. 2014; Chen et al. 2018; Sarooghi et al. 2015). Such evaluations are increasingly important for strategic human resource management



**FIGURE 1** | Theoretical model. *Note:* The dashed lines represent non-hypothesized paths.

(SHRM) and succession planning, as they can help to identify creative employees to build a strong talent pool (Collings and Mellahi 2009; SHRM 2021; Taylor 2021). This pool enables organizations to adapt and respond to changes in the business environment, thus securing and maintaining a competitive edge in the marketplace (Chen et al. 2018; Tellis et al. 2009). Therefore, evaluating creative employees for promotion is not only about individual advancement but also about fostering organizational growth and resilience.

Although evaluations of creative employees' promotability have important implications for these employees and, more broadly, for their organizations, most researchers and practitioners have treated creative behaviors—*the generation of novel and useful ideas, products, or solutions* (Amabile 1988; Tierney et al. 1999)—simply as one of many overall job performance indicators. For instance, Welbourne et al. (1998, 544) suggested that an employee's "innovator role" should be part of their overall performance at work, arguing that "employees need to behave in innovative ways ... contributing to the effectiveness and adaptability of their organization as a whole" (see also Schein 1970, 1980; Van Maanen and Schein 1979). Empirical studies have demonstrated that engaging in creative behaviors at work is directly associated with job performance and effectiveness (e.g., Aryee et al. 2012; Bartram 2005). Moreover, employees who engage in creative behaviors often initiate change, seek learning opportunities, and enhance their visibility and exposure to their leaders (Schein 1980). Thus, studies have consistently found that leaders tend to view creative behaviors positively. They perceive creative behaviors as an indicator of their employees' abilities, as well as their willingness to go above and beyond their job requirements for the success of the workgroup (Guillén and Kunze 2019; Rodrigues and Rebelo 2023; Seibert et al. 2001). Consistent with contest mobility theory in the career advancement literature, prior studies have argued that leaders often interpret creativity as a meritocratic contest, where employees who demonstrate exceptional performance, including creative contributions, are recognized as "the winners" and rewarded with promotion (Miller et al. 2005; Turner 1960).

However, sponsor mobility theory (Turner 1960) offers an alternative perspective on the promotability of creative employees. According to this view, promotion depends not only on individual merit but also on a leader's willingness to sponsor an employee's upward mobility. This type of sponsorship is typically based on interpersonal trust and emotional connection between leaders and employees. When assessing the promotability of creative employees, leaders therefore consider not only their creative contributions but also their ability to fit into the organizational culture, to adhere to company norms, and to maintain harmony within the team (Ng et al. 2005; Ng and Feldman 2014). A growing number of scholars studying creativity have recognized that creative employees often "took risks in terms of producing new ideas in doing [their] job[s]" (e.g., Tierney et al. 1999, 620). Creative employees tend to deviate from accepted norms and do not hesitate to question the status quo (Zhou and George 2001). This nonconformist nature could present a dilemma to leaders when assessing whether to "sponsor" the upward mobility of creative employees (Miller et al. 2005; Turner 1960). Although leaders recognize and appreciate the nonconformist spirit that

drives creative thinking and innovation, they must ensure that creative employees work in the best interests of the organization and avoid actions that could harm it or its stakeholders. Such dilemmas make the evaluation of creative employees' promotability a complex phenomenon, which is understudied in the organizational literature.

To understand why creative behaviors may or may not lead to leaders' perceptions of promotability, we first draw on theories of interpersonal trust (Mayer et al. 1995; McAllister 1995), suggesting that a leader's perception of their ability to establish an emotional connection (i.e., affect-based trust) with their creative employees is crucial in explaining their evaluations of these employees' promotability. Building on this suggestion, we theorize that leaders' control appraisals significantly influence their perception of their ability to develop such emotional connections with creative employees and ultimately affect their evaluations of creative employees' promotability.

## 2.2 | Theoretical Foundations: Trust-Based Promotability Model

In many cases, promoting employees involves more than simply assessing their qualifications; this is a complex social process that requires leaders to carefully evaluate the *risks* and *interdependencies* associated with integrating their subordinates into an "inner circle of elites" (Miller et al. 2005, 492) or the management team. There is an inherent risk in promoting someone to a more senior role, as leaders cannot be certain of how the employee will perform in their new position or how their actions and decisions will impact the organization as a whole (Hoobler et al. 2009; Williams and Walker 1985). Promoted individuals may struggle to effectively manage and lead others, causing tension and inefficiencies (Ng and Feldman 2010). They may also prove to be "troublemakers," disrupting the social dynamics and cultural norms of the management team (De Pater et al. 2009). This risk is amplified by interdependence within the organization, as the actions of a promoted employee can have repercussions across departments and teams, affecting the work and performance of their colleagues (Raveendran et al. 2020). When making such high-stakes decisions, leaders often carefully balance their accountability to both their superiors and their teams, ensuring that they select employees whose promotion would benefit the entire organization (Hoobler et al. 2009; Ng and Feldman 2010). Given the uncertainties and risks associated with promotion decisions, we posit that trust is highly relevant in the evaluation process (Colquitt et al. 2012; Rousseau et al. 1998).

Trust is often conceptualized as the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another person's intentions or behavior (Mayer et al. 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998). In the context of promotability evaluations, trust translates into a leader's willingness to be vulnerable (i.e., take risks) in the face of the potential negative outcomes of promoting an employee and is grounded in the leader's positive expectations of the employee's future performance and behavior in their new role. The organizational literature typically distinguishes between two forms of trust: cognition-based trust, which is predicated on

“good reasons” or evidence, such as an individual’s proven track record of reliability, responsibility, and competence, and affect-based trust, which is built on emotional bonds between individuals and often stems from extra-role efforts to demonstrate genuine care, concern, and mutual respect (Legood et al. 2023; McAllister 1995; Schaubroeck et al. 2011).

Although both types of trust are important, we argue that affect-based trust is more relevant to our investigation. Our study aims to determine whether employees’ creative behaviors adversely affect their promotability because of their inherent nonconformist nature. In this context, cognition-based trust, which relies on demonstrated reliability and consistency (McAllister 1995), may be insufficient to alleviate leaders’ concerns about the potential disruptive effects of creative employees. In contrast, affect-based trust, which is grounded in emotional bonds and mutual respect (McAllister 1995), may be more effective in reassuring leaders that, despite creative employees’ nonconformist tendencies, such employees will act in the best interests of the organization.

However, employees’ creative behaviors do not directly establish a leader’s affect-based trust in them. Creative behaviors may be seen as going beyond the prescribed role, reflecting employees’ willingness to exceed their job expectations for the benefit or success of the workgroup (Van Scotter et al. 2000). This extra-role creativity could provide the leader with an attribution basis to develop emotional bonds (affect-based trust). Conversely, creative behaviors may be perceived as nonconformist, potentially causing leaders to view them as disruptive or threatening to the status quo (Grant 2017). Leaders may be hesitant to form close emotional bonds with employees displaying these nonconformist tendencies, which may reflect these employees’ failure to commit to the group’s success and welfare.

Ultimately, the formation of affect-based trust is subjective and depends on individual differences in leaders’ personal perceptions of risks and uncertainties. Therefore, we posit that examining such individual differences—in our case, control appraisals—in moderating the impact of creative behaviors on affect-based trust can provide a more nuanced understanding of how leaders navigate the complexity of promoting creative employees. This approach not only enriches the theoretical framework of trust-based promotability but also offers practical insights to organizations seeking to optimize their talent management strategies.

### 2.3 | Individual Differences: Leaders’ Control Appraisals

As employees’ creative behavior does not in itself encourage leaders to develop emotional connections or affect-based trust with these employees, we extend the model of interpersonal trust by considering individual differences among leaders that may potentially moderate the effect of employees’ creative behavior on leaders’ affect-based trust. Building on the idea from the interpersonal trust literature that an increased sense of control can lead to a greater willingness to take risks (to be vulnerable) with uncertain parties (Bordia et al. 2004; Mayer et al. 1995), we draw on findings from psychological research suggesting that

individuals with high control appraisals are more likely to feel in control of situations and to believe that they can have an impact on their work domain (e.g., Frese and Fay 2001; Parker et al. 2006). Hence, we propose that individual differences in control appraisals moderate the relationship between employees’ creative behavior and leaders’ affect-based trust.

Control appraisals are “individuals’ expectations that they will feel control over situations and particularly that they can have an impact on work outcomes” (Parker et al. 2006, 638). Evidence suggests that people with higher control appraisals are more likely to take personal initiatives (Parker et al. 2006), seek opportunities, and take on risks that others might avoid. They also have a greater tolerance for risks and are more willing to endure short-term setbacks to achieve long-term success (Frese and Fay 2001). Consistent with this theory, we suggest that leaders with high control appraisals are typically more confident in their ability and authority to navigate potential uncertainties or disruptions within their team or organization (Parker et al. 2006). They are also more likely to perceive that they have the ability to guide and influence their employees’ behavior toward productive and beneficial outcomes (Guo et al. 2020; Sherf et al. 2019). As such, leaders with higher control appraisals may be more inclined to view their employees’ creative behaviors positively, perceiving them as extra-role efforts to drive innovation and change rather than as threats to the status quo. Consequently, these leaders may be more likely to develop affect-based trust in their creative employees, as they believe that they can effectively manage the risks and potential disruptions associated with their nonconformist tendencies.

In contrast, leaders with low control appraisals may perceive themselves as having limited ability and authority to influence or manage their team’s behavior (Parker et al. 2006). Such leaders may view their employees’ creative behaviors as a source of uncertainty and potential disruption, which they may not feel equipped to handle effectively. As a result, they may be more hesitant to establish affect-based trust with their creative employees, as they may perceive such employees as threats to their team’s stability and cohesion. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Leaders’ control appraisals moderate the relationship between employees’ creative behavior and leaders’ affect-based trust, such that the stronger the leaders’ control appraisals, the more positive the relationship between employees’ creative behavior and leaders’ affect-based trust.*

### 2.4 | Affect-Based Trust and Promotability

As discussed, in the context of promotability evaluations, trust is critical as it reflects a leader’s willingness to accept the vulnerability and risk associated with promoting an employee (Mayer et al. 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998). Leaders are more likely to promote employees they trust, as this reduces the perceived risk associated with promotion. Given the subjective nature of trust and its emotional component (Legood et al. 2023; McAllister 1995), affect-based trust is especially relevant in this context. Leaders who develop strong emotional bonds and

mutual respect with their creative employees may feel more comfortable promoting them despite their nonconformist tendencies because affect-based trust reassures them that these employees will act in the best interests of the organization (Legood et al. 2023; McAllister 1995), reducing the perceived risk associated with their promotion.

Hence, we propose that leaders' control appraisals moderate the indirect relationship between employees' creative behavior and their promotability through leaders' affect-based trust in these employees. Leaders' affect-based trust in creative employees, strengthened by their high control appraisals, should promote positive promotability evaluations, as leaders feel confident in their ability to manage the risks associated with promoting these employees (Frese and Fay 2001). In contrast, for leaders with low control appraisals, the lack of affect-based trust in their creative employees may impede positive evaluations, as such leaders may perceive the promotion of creative employees as a threat to team stability and cohesion. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Leaders' control appraisals moderate the indirect relationship between employees' creative behavior and their promotability through leaders' affect-based trust in these employees.*

### 3 | Overview of Studies

To test our hypotheses, we used a multi-method design, including a multi-wave field study (Study 1) and a business simulation experiment (Study 2). In Study 1, we collected data from four knowledge-intensive companies in China to establish external validity. This approach allowed us to examine our hypotheses in a real-world setting, enhancing the generalizability of our findings. In Study 2, we conducted a business simulation experiment with a 2 (employee behavior: creative vs. noncreative) × 2 (leader control appraisal: high vs. low) between-subjects design through an online survey platform. This experimental design was used to replicate the findings of Study 1 and to establish internal validity by controlling for extraneous variables and isolating the effects of the independent variables.

## 4 | Study 1: Method

### 4.1 | Sample and Procedures

Our research was conducted with four foreign-invested professional services firms located in southern China and specializing in management consulting and IT services. These knowledge-intensive organizations were ideal for our study because of their strong emphasis on fostering creative behaviors, which are crucial for maintaining competitiveness (Anderson et al. 2014; Tellis et al. 2009). They use well-structured “dual-track career ladder systems,” a widely adopted framework in knowledge-intensive firms such as Microsoft, Google, and Meta (Google Recruiter 2020). Typically, these systems include a management track (e.g., from supervisor to senior supervisor, manager, and

director) and a parallel professional/technical track (e.g., from junior engineer to engineer, senior engineer, and expert). The existence of this formal career ladder indicates that institutional advancement mechanisms based on technical expertise and innovative contribution are in place. This organizational context enabled us to examine why, even within organizations that formally value and intend to promote creativity, such policies may fail to translate into practice at the micro level of leaders' individual evaluations. Thus, these organizations provided a suitable and compelling setting to investigate the psychological processes underlying leaders' promotion decisions.

Initially, we contacted the HR managers of these companies to explain our research objectives and procedures. The HR managers showed substantial support and encouraged employee participation. To ensure adherence to ethical standards, we informed the participants that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential, be used solely for research purposes, and be accessed only by the research team. In addition, we provided the HR departments with consultancy reports and offered the respondents souvenirs as a token of appreciation. The HR managers then provided us with lists containing basic information on 364 leader–employee pairs. Our data collection followed a dyadic structure, as each leader was paired with a corresponding employee.

We used a time-lagged, three-wave data collection method with a two-week interval. This time interval mitigated common method bias (Ostroff et al. 2002; Podsakoff et al. 2003). The assessments were administered using a mobile survey platform ([www.huajuetech.com](http://www.huajuetech.com)), which helps researchers collect data using complex survey designs (e.g., longitudinal or multisource). Before the study, both the leaders and employees were asked to provide their demographic information, including their age, gender, education level, organizational tenure, and position rank. The employees were also asked to indicate how long they had been working with their respective leaders. In the first wave, the leaders were asked to evaluate their employees' creative behavior. From the initial sample of 364 leaders, we received 272 completed questionnaires, a response rate of 74.73%. During the second wave, the leaders reported their control appraisals and the level of trust they had in their designated employees. This wave yielded 266 complete leader questionnaires, with a response rate of 73.08%. In the third wave, the leaders assessed the promotability of their designated employees, with 264 leader questionnaires returned, a response rate of 72.53%.

In our sample, 55% of the leaders were men, with an average age of 34.19 years (SD = 5.02). The vast majority (98.90%) held at least an undergraduate degree. The average organizational tenure was 54.81 months (SD = 32.21). Among the employees, 55.88% were men, with an average age of 29.53 years (SD = 4.42). The vast majority (98.90%) held at least an undergraduate degree, with an average organizational tenure of 32.15 months (SD = 22.25) and an average duration of working with their leaders of 22.94 months (SD = 16.11).

All measures, analysis codes, and output files from Study 1 are available at [https://osf.io/q4swu/overview?view\\_only=8fdb5193918466ba6bb5017642d2943](https://osf.io/q4swu/overview?view_only=8fdb5193918466ba6bb5017642d2943).

## 4.2 | Measures

Given that our study was conducted in China, we adhered to Brislin's (1986) recommendations by using translation and back-translation procedures from English to Chinese to ensure the accuracy and cultural relevance of all of the measures translated.<sup>2</sup> All of the items in this study were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

### 4.2.1 | Employees' Creative Behavior

We used a nine-item scale developed by Tierney et al. (1999) to measure employees' creative behavior. Sample items are "this employee took risks in terms of producing new ideas in doing their job" and "this employee tried new ideas and approaches to solve problems" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

### 4.2.2 | Leaders' Control Appraisals

We used the four-item scale developed by Parker et al. (2006) to measure leaders' control appraisals. Sample items are "I feel powerless to control the outcomes of the process I work on" (reversed) and "the same problems keep happening again and again, regardless of what I do" (reversed-coded; Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

### 4.2.3 | Leaders' Affect-Based Trust in Employees

We used a five-item scale developed by McAllister (1995) to measure leaders' affect-based trust in employees. Sample items are "I can talk freely to this individual about difficulties I am having at work and know that (s)he will want to listen" and "we would both feel a sense of loss if one of us was transferred and we could no longer work together" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

### 4.2.4 | Employee Promotability

We used a three-item scale adapted from Huang et al. (2018) to measure employee promotability. The original three items focus exclusively on formal hierarchical promotions and thus fail to capture the core conceptualization of promotability—that is, an employee's positive advancement prospects (Greenhaus et al. 1990, 69; De Pater et al. 2009, 298). This limitation is particularly salient in our research context, where HR managers indicated that recommendations for pay raises or awards are concrete signals of promotability and often precede formal promotion decisions. To align the measure with the reality of the field study's context, we adapted the items to capture a leader's active recommendation regarding an employee's advancement prospects. The first item (I recommend that he/she be promoted) was taken directly from Huang et al. (2018), representing formal hierarchical advancement. The two remaining items were adapted by integrating the conceptual domain of the "job rewards" scale developed by Park et al. (2022). The two adapted items were: "I recommend that this employee receive a raise" and "I recommend that this employee receive public recognition (e.g., a company award)."

### 4.2.5 | Control Variables

To rigorously test our model and rule out alternative explanations, we controlled for several employee and leader factors that could influence leaders' trust and promotion decisions. For employees, we included their demographic variables (age, gender, education level, and position rank) because these characteristics can influence perceptions of trust and promotability, with factors such as age and education level affecting experience and skills and gender and position rank influencing organizational dynamics and biases (Babcock et al. 2017). We also controlled for job performance, as it is a critical factor in promotion decisions and trust evaluations, with high-performing employees generally being perceived as more competent (Hoobler et al. 2009; Van Scotter et al. 2000). In addition, we included two types of organizational citizenship behaviors<sup>3</sup>: interpersonal harmony, which reflects an employee's ability to maintain positive relationships and serves as a proxy for benevolence, and company resource protection, which refers to integrity and conscientiousness in safeguarding organizational resources (Skarlicki and Latham 1996). For leaders, we controlled for their demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, and education level),<sup>4</sup> as these can influence their perceptions and decision-making processes, with factors such as age and education level affecting openness to new ideas and trust in employees (Guillén and Kunze 2019). We also included personality traits (openness to experience and narcissism), as these can significantly affect leaders' evaluations of employees, with openness leading to a greater appreciation of creative behaviors and narcissism affecting trust and promotion decisions due to self-centered biases (Jordan et al. 2014; McCrae 1987). Furthermore, we controlled for power- and status-related factors, including leaders' power distance, which reflects the extent to which leaders accept and expect power inequalities, and leaders' perceived insider status, which indicates how well leaders are integrated into the organization (Tang et al. 2020; Venkataramani et al. 2024). Furthermore, we controlled for organizational and leader-employee dyadic tenure to eliminate systematic errors and confounding effects due to the quality of the leader-employee relationship, as longer tenures may lead to stronger relationships and higher levels of trust (Tierney et al. 1999).

Finally, in our path model, we included leaders' cognition-based trust as a mediator in addition to their affect-based trust to account for the competence perspective in the promotability literature, as leaders' trust based on evidence such as an employee's track record of reliability, responsibility, and competence can significantly influence their promotion decisions (Jawahar and Ferris 2011; Ng and Feldman 2010).

## 4.3 | Analytical Strategy

Before testing our hypotheses, we assessed the distinctiveness of the focal variables—employees' creative behavior, leaders' control appraisals, leaders' trust in employees, and employee promotability—by conducting a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using Mplus 8.3 (Muthén and Muthén 2015). This step ensured that our measurement model accurately captured the constructs of interest.

Next, we conducted a path analysis using the Bayesian estimator in Mplus 8.3 to obtain unbiased estimates of the hypothesized model (Preacher et al. 2010). To test the hypothesized conditional indirect effects, we performed a Bayesian analysis with 20000 iterations using a Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) simulation (Muthén 2010). We examined the 95% credibility intervals (CIs) to assess the significance and strength of the indirect effects. The Bayesian analysis was adopted because it does not require or assume normal distributions (Yuan and MacKinnon 2009) and has a low tendency to produce a Type I error when the sample size is small (Koopman et al. 2015). Mplus retained 266 observations with complete data on the exogenous variables in the final analysis.

We evaluated the posterior scale reduction (PSR) factor, Bayesian autocorrelation plots, and trace plots for each model parameter sampled in the MCMC process over the number of iterations to test the fit of our models. The correct convergence of a model is indicated if, for each parameter, (1) the PSR factor is close to 1, (2) there is little autocorrelation in the plot, and (3) there are no trends or large fluctuations or deviations (i.e., good mixing) in the trace plot (Jebb and Woo 2015; Kaplan 2014; Zyphur and Oswald 2015).

The posterior means of the path coefficients, standard deviations, and 95% CIs are reported in Table 3. The slopes and conditional indirect effects are summarized in Table 4. Before the analysis, all exogenous variables included in the model (except for gender) were grand-mean centered (Aiken and West 1991).

## 4.4 | Results

### 4.4.1 | Correlations

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations of the main variables. The results indicate that employees' creative behavior was positively correlated with leaders' affect-based trust in employees ( $r=0.53, p<0.01$ ) and employee promotability ( $r=0.18, p<0.01$ ) and that leaders' affect-based trust in employees was positively correlated with employee promotability ( $r=0.36, p<0.01$ ). Moreover, leaders' control appraisals were positively correlated with their affect-based trust in employees ( $r=0.22, p<0.01$ ) and employee promotability ( $r=0.30, p<0.01$ ). In addition, leaders' control appraisals were not significantly correlated with their cognition-based trust ( $r=0.05, n.s.$ ). These results aligned with our expectations.

### 4.4.2 | CFAs

A series of CFAs were conducted to assess the discriminant validity of our four main variables (Muthén and Muthén 2015). As shown in Table 2, the CFA results demonstrate that our hypothesized model had a good fit [ $\chi^2(183)=439.59, p<0.001$ ; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=0.07; comparative fit index (CFI)=0.91; Tucker–Lewis index (TLI)=0.89; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)=0.05] based on the criteria suggested by Hu and Bentler (1998). In addition, a series of chi-square difference tests were conducted, indicating that the hypothesized four-factor model (including employees' creative

**TABLE 1** | Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between variables (Study 1).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Leader perceived insider status	4.00	0.51											
2. Leader power distance	2.60	0.66	0.03										
3. Leader narcissism	1.95	0.63	-0.17**	0.30**									
4. Leader openness to experience	3.45	0.80	-0.02	-0.09	-0.15*								
5. Job performance	3.85	0.47	0.24**	-0.21**	-0.11	0.19**							
6. OCB: Interpersonal harmony	1.78	0.46	0.11	0.03	-0.09	-0.05	-0.10						
7. OCB: Company resource protection	1.90	0.35	-0.01	0.05	-0.07	0.05	-0.12	0.53**					
8. Employee creative behavior	3.57	0.58	0.19**	-0.23**	-0.16**	0.42**	0.51**	-0.03	-0.00				
9. Leader control appraisal	3.57	0.68	-0.00	0.02	0.14*	0.09	0.17**	-0.20**	-0.34**	0.22**			
10. Leader cognition-based trust	3.76	0.41	0.13*	-0.26**	-0.06	0.14*	0.14*	-0.05	-0.10	0.29**	0.05		
11. Leader affect-based trust	3.63	0.55	0.16**	-0.21**	-0.06	0.23**	0.29**	-0.03	-0.09	0.53**	0.22*	0.65**	
12. Employee promotability	2.98	0.77	0.08	-0.03	0.11	-0.00	0.12*	-0.20**	-0.32**	0.18**	0.30**	0.36**	0.36**

Abbreviations: M = mean; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; SD = standard deviation.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**TABLE 2** | Model fit statistics for testing discriminant validity (Study 1).

	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Four-factor model (employee creative behavior, leader control appraisal, leader affect-based trust, and employee promotability)	439.59	183	2.40	—	0.91	0.89	0.07	0.05
Three-factor model (employee creative behavior, leader control appraisal, and leader affect-based trust + employee promotability)	758.93	186	4.08	319.34***	0.79	0.77	0.11	0.08
Two-factor model (employee creative behavior and leader control appraisal + leader affect-based trust + employee promotability)	1108.71	188	5.90	669.12***	0.67	0.63	0.13	0.11
One-factor model (employee creative behavior + leader control appraisal + leader affect-based trust + employee promotability)	1449.06	189	7.67	1009.47***	0.55	0.50	0.16	0.13

Note: "+" represents the combination of the corresponding factors. Abbreviations: CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

behavior, leaders' control appraisals, leaders' affect-based trust, and employee promotability) fit the data significantly better than alternative models (please refer to Table 2 for more details). These results provided evidence that our four constructs were empirically distinct.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.4.3 | Hypothesis Testing

Our model converged properly, as indicated by a PSR factor close to 1 for each parameter, low Bayesian autocorrelation, and trace plots from the MCMC simulation showing good mixing (Jebb and Woo 2015; Kaplan 2014; Zyphur and Oswald 2015). Overall, our model explained 20%, 26%, and 41% of the variance in leaders' cognition-based trust, leaders' affect-based trust, and employee promotability, respectively.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that leaders' control appraisals would moderate the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust, such that the positive relationship would be stronger when leaders had higher control appraisals. The path analysis results are shown in Table 3. The interaction term (employee creative behavior  $\times$  leader control appraisal) had a significant effect on leaders' affect-based trust ( $\beta = 0.17$ , 95% CI = [0.02, 0.33]). Furthermore, we conducted a simple slope analysis to assess the moderating effect. The results showed that the positive influence of employees' creative behavior on leaders' affect-based trust in employees was stronger (simple slope = 0.51, 95% CI = [0.33, 0.69]) when leader control appraisal was high (1 SD above the mean) and weaker (simple slope = 0.27, 95% CI = [0.11, 0.43]) when it was low (1 SD below the mean). In addition, the difference between the slopes for high and low leader control appraisals was significant (slope difference = 0.24, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.44]). We plotted this moderating effect with the conditional values of leader control appraisals (1 SD above and below the mean) in Figure 2. As shown in Figure 2, the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust was stronger when leaders' control appraisal was higher.

To further investigate the moderating effect, we adopted the Johnson–Neyman (J-N) technique (Gardner et al. 2017; Preacher et al. 2007). The key advantage of the J-N technique over the conventional pick-a-point approach (i.e., choosing values of 1 SD above and below the mean of the moderator) is to identify the regions of significance—the points at which the simple slope changes from nonsignificant to significant (e.g., Li et al. 2023; Peng et al. 2026). We assessed the regions of significance across the full observed centered range of leader control appraisals [−2.57, 1.43] (corresponding to the original range [1, 5]). The results showed that when leader control appraisal (centralized) was greater than −1.09 (raw score ranges from 2.48 to 5), the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust in employees was significant and positive (simple slope = 0.20), as the 95% CI was above zero and entirely positive. However, when leader control appraisal was less than −1.09 (raw score ranges from 1.00 to 2.48), the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust in employees did not reach statistical significance at the 95% CI (see Table 4 and Figure 3). These results supported Hypothesis 1.

**TABLE 3** | Unstandardized coefficients of the hypothesized model with the Bayesian approach (Study 1).

	Leader cognition-based trust			Leader affect-based trust			Employee promotability		
	$\beta$	SD	95% CI	$\beta$	SD	95% CI	$\beta$	SD	95% CI
Control variables									
Company 1 (dummy)	0.01	0.08	[-0.15, 0.17]	0.14	0.10	[-0.05, 0.32]	0.40*	0.14	[0.12, 0.68]
Company 2 (dummy)	0.15*	0.07	[0.02, 0.28]	0.23*	0.08	[0.07, 0.38]	0.04	0.11	[-0.18, 0.26]
Company 3 (dummy)	-0.06	0.07	[-0.19, 0.07]	-0.02	0.08	[-0.18, 0.14]	-0.08	0.13	[-0.32, 0.17]
Employee age	0.02*	0.01	[0.01, 0.04]	0.01	0.01	[-0.01, 0.03]	0.03	0.02	[-0.01, 0.06]
Employee gender	0.00	0.05	[-0.09, 0.10]	-0.00	0.06	[-0.12, 0.11]	0.02	0.09	[-0.15, 0.18]
Employee education	-0.03	0.07	[-0.16, 0.10]	0.03	0.08	[-0.13, 0.19]	-0.00	0.11	[-0.23, 0.22]
Employee position rank	0.00	0.04	[-0.08, 0.08]	0.03	0.05	[-0.07, 0.12]	0.15*	0.07	[0.02, 0.27]
Leader age	-0.00	0.01	[-0.02, 0.01]	-0.01	0.01	[-0.02, 0.01]	-0.01	0.01	[-0.03, 0.02]
Leader gender	-0.05	0.05	[-0.14, 0.05]	-0.11*	0.06	[-0.23, -0.001]	0.17	0.10	[-0.04, 0.38]
Leader education	0.06	0.06	[-0.05, 0.17]	-0.03	0.07	[-0.16, 0.10]	0.01	0.09	[-0.18, 0.20]
Leader-employee dyadic tenure	-0.00	0.00	[-0.004, 0.003]	0.00	0.00	[-0.004, 0.004]	0.00	0.00	[-0.004, 0.01]
Leader perceived insider status	0.05	0.05	[-0.05, 0.15]	0.05	0.06	[-0.06, 0.17]	0.00	0.08	[-0.16, 0.17]
Leader power distance	-0.17	0.04	[-0.25, -0.09]	-0.13*	0.05	[-0.22, -0.03]	-0.05	0.07	[-0.19, 0.09]
Leader narcissism	0.03	0.04	[-0.05, 0.11]	0.03	0.05	[-0.07, 0.13]	0.04	0.07	[-0.10, 0.17]
Leader openness to experience	0.03	0.03	[-0.04, 0.10]	0.04	0.04	[-0.05, 0.12]	-0.06	0.06	[-0.17, 0.05]
Job performance	-0.06	0.06	[-0.19, 0.06]	-0.00	0.08	[-0.15, 0.15]	0.04	0.11	[-0.17, 0.25]
OCB: Interpersonal harmony	-0.05	0.07	[-0.18, 0.09]	0.03	0.08	[-0.13, 0.19]	-0.14	0.12	[-0.36, 0.09]
OCB: Company resource protection	-0.11	0.09	[-0.28, 0.06]	-0.08	0.11	[-0.28, 0.13]	-0.27	0.15	[-0.56, 0.02]
Independent variables									
Employee creative behavior	0.13*	0.06	[0.02, 0.25]	0.39*	0.07	[0.26, 0.52]	-0.07	0.10	[-0.26, 0.13]
Leader control appraisal	-0.01	0.04	[-0.09, 0.08]	0.10*	0.05	[0.01, 0.20]	0.13	0.07	[-0.001, 0.26]
Employee creative behavior $\times$ leader control appraisal	0.09	0.07	[-0.04, 0.21]	0.17*	0.08	[0.02, 0.33]			
Mediator									

(Continues)

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

	Leader cognition-based trust			Leader affect-based trust			Employee promotability		
	$\beta$	SD	95% CI	$\beta$	SD	95% CI	$\beta$	SD	95% CI
Leader cognition-based trust							0.28*	0.13	[0.02, 0.54]
Leader affect-based trust							0.22*	0.11	[0.002, 0.43]
$R^2$	0.20	0.04	[0.13, 0.28]	0.26	0.04	[0.18, 0.35]	0.41	0.05	[0.31, 0.51]

Note:  $n = 266$ .

Abbreviations: CI = credibility interval; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; SD = posterior standard deviation;  $\beta$  = posterior means of path coefficients.

\* $p < 0.025$ , one-tailed.

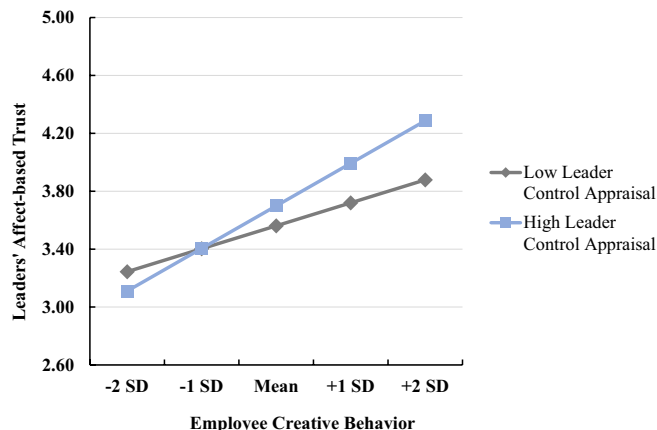


FIGURE 2 | General patterns of the moderating effect of leaders' control appraisals on the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust in employees (Study 1).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that leaders' control appraisals would moderate the indirect relationship between employees' creative behavior and their promotability via leaders' affect-based trust, such that this indirect relationship would be stronger when leaders had higher control appraisals. The J-N analysis results demonstrated that the indirect effect of employees' creative behavior on their promotability through leaders' affect-based trust in employees became significant and positive (indirect effect = 0.05) when leaders' control appraisal was greater than  $-0.77$  (raw score = 2.80). Thus, for all observed values of leader control appraisals above this threshold (raw scores between 2.80 and 5), the indirect effect was positive and significant and more pronounced. Conversely, for leaders with control appraisals at or below this threshold (raw scores from 1 to 2.80), the indirect effect was not statistically significant (see the bottom half of Table 4). These findings supported Hypothesis 2.

#### 4.5 | Study 1 Discussion

The results of Study 1 confirmed the moderating effect of leaders' control appraisals on the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust (Hypothesis 1) and the conditional indirect effect of employees' creative behavior and promotability through leaders' affect-based trust

(Hypothesis 2). Although significant effects were observed in real-world organizations in our field study, we aimed to replicate these findings in a more controlled environment to establish internal validity. Therefore, we conducted Study 2, a business simulation experiment, to further test our hypotheses.

## 5 | Study 2

### 5.1 | Sample

Participants ( $n = 546$ ) from China with managerial experience<sup>6</sup> were recruited via the online survey platform Credamo (<https://www.credamo.com>). The average age of the final sample was 31.84 years ( $SD = 7.06$ ), 304 (55.7%) of the participants were women, and the average tenure of the participants in managerial positions was 3.58 years ( $SD = 2.86$ ). Of all of the participants, 72% had a bachelor's degree and 20.3% had a master's degree or above. Each participant received compensation of RMB5.00 (approximately USD 0.69) upon completion of the study.

### 5.2 | Experimental Setting and Procedure

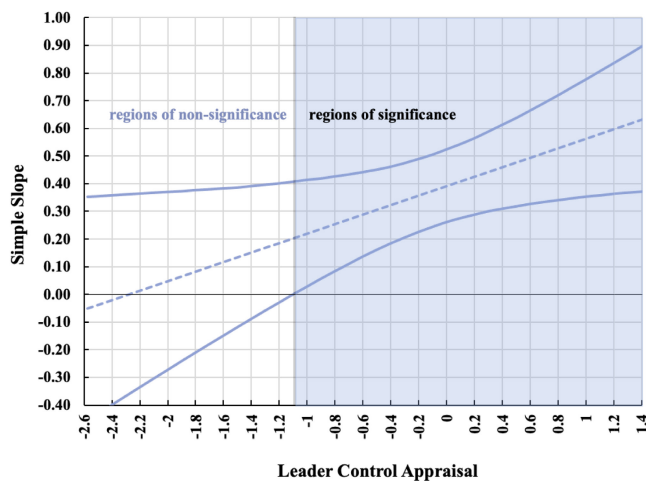
We conducted a preregistered<sup>7</sup> online business simulation experiment to investigate the interaction effects of employees' creative behavior and leaders' control appraisals on leaders' affect-based trust and promotion decisions regarding a focal employee. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design, with employee behavior (creative vs. noncreative) and leader control appraisals (high vs. low) as independent variables. The participants could voluntarily end the experiment at any time. The syntax, data, and experimental materials for this study are available at [https://osf.io/q4swu/overview?view\\_only=8fdb5193918466ba6bb5017642d2943](https://osf.io/q4swu/overview?view_only=8fdb5193918466ba6bb5017642d2943).

Our experimental context was inspired by *Poly Bridge*, a popular bridge-building simulation game developed by Dry Cactus (<http://polybridge.drycactus.com/>). This game requires players to design and construct bridges that can support the weight and stress of various vehicles crossing the river, while respecting a budget and using different construction materials. This engaging and relevant context was chosen to ensure the ecological validity of the business simulation experiment. The participants were assigned the role of a leader at a renowned architectural firm. This role required them to evaluate bridge-building proposals

**TABLE 4** | Slopes and conditional indirect effects of employees' creative behavior on their promotability (Study 1).

Estimated path	Regions of significance across the observed range of leader control appraisals	Corresponding effect estimates
Simple slope Employee creative behavior → leader affect-based trust	Leader control appraisal > 2.48	Effect > 0.20
Indirect effects Employee creative behavior → leader affect-based trust → employee promotability	Leader control appraisal > 2.80	Effect > 0.05

Note:  $n = 266$ .



**FIGURE 3** | Moderating effect of leaders' control appraisals on the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust in employees (Study 1). Note: The figure presents the confidence bands (the curve lines) around the conditional effect (the dashed line) of employees' creative behavior on leaders' affect-based trust in employees across the distribution of leader control appraisals (on the horizontal axis). The vertical axis represents the coefficient of the relationship between employees' creative behavior and leaders' affect-based trust in employees. The two curves on the horizontal axis represent the upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence interval around the conditional effect. The region where the confidence band does not include zero (leader control appraisal > -1.09) indicates the region of significance; the region where the confidence band includes zero (leader control appraisal ≤ -1.09) indicates the region of non-significance.

submitted by employees using *Poly Bridge*. These proposals were presented through 30-s animations, providing a dynamic and immersive simulated environment. This method surpasses traditional scenario-based experiments by offering a more interactive and realistic context for investigating the interaction effect of employees' creative behavior and leaders' control appraisals.

Initially, the participants were asked to imagine themselves as team leaders within the prestigious research and development division of an architectural firm known for exploring innovative and unconventional construction methods. The division

was soliciting creative solutions for a major overseas project that required novel approaches to structural challenges. The task was to enable cars to cross a river, without worrying about vehicle safety or the reusability of the bridge. The participants were informed that their role was to decide on the promotion of an employee based on their creativity and effectiveness demonstrated in their design proposal, which should reflect the employee's past creative behaviors.

During the manipulation phase, the participants were randomly assigned to the creative behavior or noncreative behavior condition. In the creative behavior condition, the bridge-building proposal demonstrated innovative and unconventional design solutions. In contrast, the noncreative behavior condition featured a standard and conventional design. Each proposal was presented in a 30-s animation created using *Poly Bridge*. Usefulness was standardized across conditions, with both designs meeting the core requirement of enabling the car to cross the river. Therefore, novelty was the focal dimension distinguishing creative from noncreative behaviors in this experiment.

Following the review of the proposals, the participants were randomly assigned to the high or low control appraisal condition. Those in the high control appraisal condition read materials emphasizing their significant influence on the work environment and the bridge construction process. Conversely, those in the low control appraisal condition read materials suggesting limited influence. The participants then rated their control appraisals over the work environment and the bridge construction process.

After the manipulation phase, the participants conducted a performance appraisal of the focal employee. They assessed the employee's creative behavior, affect-based trust, and promotability. These assessments were conducted using validated scales to ensure reliability and validity. Finally, the participants provided their demographic information, including their age, gender, education level, and years of experience in their current managerial positions.

### 5.3 | Manipulation of Employees' Creative Behavior

We manipulated employees' creative behavior by providing different bridge-building proposals (creative vs. noncreative

behavior) recorded as animations. The rationale for designing this manipulation was grounded in the concept that novelty and usefulness are core elements of creative behavior (Amabile 1988; Tierney et al. 1999). Specifically, the novelty element is the critical factor that differentiates creative behavior from noncreative behavior (e.g., routine problem-solving; Amabile 1982; Harvey and Berry 2023), while the usefulness element distinguishes creative ideas from those that are crazy and irrelevant to a proposed problem (George 2007). Therefore, given our promotability evaluation context in which the task explicitly required the participants to evaluate designs that enabled the car to cross the river, meaning that the problem had to be solved, we treated usefulness as constant across conditions. This approach also aligned with prior research on creativity emphasizing novelty as a defining characteristic of creativity (Campbell 1960; Litchfield et al. 2015) and with practices in experimental research on creativity (e.g., Mueller et al. 2011).

In the creative behavior condition, the animation showed an employee using a falling cement block to hit the front of the car and propel it across the river. This method, which mirrors high-stakes innovation contexts such as SpaceX's reusable rockets or Tesla's Cybertruck, where radical ideas initially perceived as implausible redefine industries, was highly novel. Unlike the conventional approach of crossing a bridge, it used an external force, a method rarely seen before. The approach also proved useful, as it enabled the car to cross the river, demonstrating functional creativity.

In the noncreative behavior condition, the animation showed an employee using cement and wood to construct a bridge, allowing the car to cross the river directly on the bridge deck. This method was considered to have low novelty because it involved a conventional approach commonly used in bridge construction. However, it was still highly useful as it successfully enabled the car to cross the river. This contrast between novelty and usefulness helped to clearly distinguish creative behavior from noncreative behavior in our experiment (Carnevale et al. 2021; Mueller et al. 2011; Zhou et al. 2024).

To mitigate the potential negative perceptions of car damage resulting from the creative behavior condition, the participants in both conditions were reminded that neither the car's safety nor the bridge's reusability should be prioritized; the only criterion was that the car successfully crossed the river. We also ensured that the construction costs were identical in both conditions to maintain comparability by presenting the participants with a detailed breakdown of expenses. Although the proposal in the creative behavior condition led to cost savings, the construction process involved trial-and-error expenses. Table 5 provides annotated figures illustrating how the car crossed the river in the creative and noncreative behavior conditions.

## 5.4 | Manipulation of Leaders' Control Appraisals

We manipulated leaders' control appraisals (high vs. low) by adopting an established conceptualization and item descriptions related to control appraisal (Parker et al. 2006) and integrating them into a statement presented after the participants (as leaders) reviewed the proposals:

As a team leader, the company has given you sufficient (limited) discretion. Your knowledge, abilities, and skills are excellent (insufficient), enabling you to (making it difficult to) have a significant impact on team affairs and (or) effectively control problems and various work results within the team. You can (are unable to) revise and optimize proposals put forward by team members and (or) propose reasonable improvement measures. You have sufficient (no) control over the design and (or) implementation of the bridge construction plan. You find that (no matter what you do,) you can (cannot) ensure that problems encountered do not recur.

This manipulation approach was consistent with established recall manipulations (e.g., Cichocka et al. 2018; Dow et al. 2023), allowing the participants to internalize and familiarize themselves with the extent of their perceived control. By presenting these tailored statements, we enabled our participants to vividly experience the high or low control appraisal condition, thereby ensuring the ecological validity of our experimental design.

## 5.5 | Measures

### 5.5.1 | Manipulation Checks

To ensure the effectiveness of our manipulation of employees' creative behavior, we integrated a detailed manipulation check into the performance appraisal form provided to the participants. This form was designed to evaluate the employee's suitability for promotion based on their creative performance.

The participants were asked to assess the employee's creative performance based on three criteria: (1) the extent to which the employee took risks to propose original ideas, (2) the degree to which the employee tried new or untested ideas to solve problems, and (3) the extent to which the employee generated ideas that were revolutionary in their field. These criteria were designed to reflect the core elements of creative behavior, namely, novelty and usefulness (Amabile 1988; Tierney et al. 1999). The participants were asked to rate the employee on each of these criteria using a single-item scale: O (*outstanding*), E (*excellent*), A (*good*), B (*moderate*), C (*fair*), D (*below average*), or F (*failed*).<sup>8</sup> This approach was chosen to simulate a realistic performance appraisal setting, allowing the participants to make informed judgments about the employee's promotability based on their creative behavior.

In addition, to assess the effectiveness of the leader control appraisal manipulation, we used a four-item scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.94$ ) developed by Parker et al. (2006), as in Study 1, after presenting the manipulation materials.

### 5.5.2 | Leaders' Affect-Based Trust in Employees

To measure leaders' affect-based trust in employees, we used the same items as in Study 1, with one exception (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.84$ ). We excluded the item "I would have to say that we have both made considerable emotional investments in our

TABLE 5 | Experimental materials (Study 2).

	Annotated figures illustrating a car crossing a river	Why is it creative/not creative?
Creative behavior		<p><b>Why is it creative/not creative?</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. High novelty: It did not involve the car crossing the bridge but used an external force, a method rarely used before.</li> <li>2. High usefulness: It enabled the car to cross the river.</li> </ol>
Noncreative behavior		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Low novelty: It involved the car directly crossing the bridge deck, a commonly used method.</li> <li>2. High usefulness: It enabled the car to cross the river.</li> </ol>

working relationship” because the participants did not have actual interactions with the employee in this experimental scenario. Removing this item ensured the scale’s accuracy and validity to reflect affect-based trust levels in the study context.

### 5.5.3 | Employee Promotability

We assessed employee promotability using the same items as in Study 1 (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.87$ ). To strengthen our measure, we also asked the participants to respond to the following question: “Based on this employee’s proposal and your performance appraisal, would you recommend this employee for promotion to lead this bridge construction project?” The participants answered using a binary scale (1 = Yes; 0 = No).

## 5.6 | Results

### 5.6.1 | Manipulation Checks

The participants in the creative behavior condition reported higher creative behavior ( $M=6.00$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ) than those in the noncreative behavior condition ( $M=4.99$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ),  $t(544)=13.10$ ,  $p<0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d=1.13$ . In addition, the participants in the high control appraisal condition reported higher control ( $M=5.81$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ) than those in the low control appraisal condition ( $M=2.40$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ),  $t(544)=36.33$ ,  $p<0.001$ , Cohen’s  $d=3.11$ . Therefore, the manipulations of employees’ creative behavior and leaders’ control appraisals were successful.

### 5.6.2 | Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted that leaders’ control appraisals would moderate the relationship between employees’ creative behavior and leaders’ affect-based trust. A  $2 \times 2$  analysis of variance showed a significant interaction between employee creative behavior  $\times$  leader control appraisal,  $F(1, 542)=4.24$ ,  $p=0.040$ ,  $\eta^2=0.01$  (see Figure 4). Specifically, a significantly higher (vs. lower) level of leaders’ affect-based trust when their control appraisals were high (vs. low) was found in the employee creative behavior condition ( $M=5.50$  vs.  $M=4.96$ , difference in means  $=0.54$ ,  $F(1, 542)=17.88$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), but a nonsignificantly different level of leaders’ affect-based trust was observed when their control appraisals were high (vs. low) in the employee noncreative behavior ( $M=5.33$  vs.  $M=5.16$ , difference in means  $=0.18$ ,  $F(1, 542)=2.11$ ,  $p=0.147$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, we found that leaders’ affect-based trust was higher in the low control/noncreative condition than in the low control/creative condition (see Figure 4). This pattern further confirmed our theorized mechanism and supported Hypothesis 1. Due to the nonconformist nature of creative behavior (Grant 2017), leaders with low control appraisals view employees’ creative behavior as a threat to stability, which inhibits the development of emotional bonding (i.e., affect-based trust). In contrast, conventional (noncreative) behavior aligns with their need for predictability, fostering a relatively safer

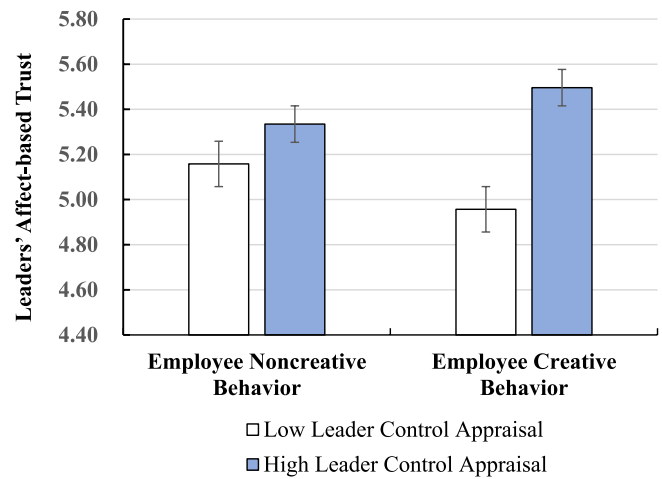


FIGURE 4 | Interaction effect of employees’ creative behavior and leaders’ control appraisals on leaders’ affect-based trust (Study 2).

context for the development of affect-based trust. This result provides clear causal evidence that leaders’ control appraisals critically determine whether creative behavior builds or undermines their affect-based trust in the promotability evaluation process.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that leaders’ control appraisals would moderate the indirect relationship between employees’ creative behavior and their promotability via leaders’ affect-based trust. We used a Bayesian analytical approach with MCMC simulation, examining the 95% CIs generated from 20000 iterations, to test this conditional indirect effect. Our model achieved proper convergence, as evidenced by a PSR factor close to 1 for all parameters, minimal Bayesian autocorrelation, and trace plots from the MCMC simulation indicating good mixing (Jebb and Woo 2015; Kaplan 2014; Zyphur and Oswald 2015). The results showed that in the low control appraisal condition, the conditional indirect effect of employees’ creative behavior on promotability through leaders’ affect-based trust in employees was significant and negative (indirect effect  $=-0.21$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.347, -0.076]$ ). However, in the high control appraisal condition, the conditional indirect effect became positive, although it was not statistically significant (indirect effect  $=0.12$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.068, 0.312]$ ). The difference between indirect effects in the high and low control appraisal conditions was significant (difference  $=0.33$ ; 95% CI  $[0.099, 0.569]$ ). Based on these findings, Hypothesis 2 was supported, indicating that leaders with low control appraisals are less likely to develop affect-based trust in employees’ creative behavior and are therefore less likely to consider these employees for promotion.

To further validate our findings regarding the conditional indirect effect, we conducted a robustness analysis. We replicated our analysis using a binary measure of employee promotability as the dependent variable instead of the original measure, and the results<sup>10</sup> remained consistent (indirect effect in the high control appraisal condition  $=0.13$ , 95% CI  $[-0.068, 0.331]$ ; indirect effect in the low control appraisal condition  $=-0.22$ , 95% CI  $[-0.371, -0.080]$ ; difference  $=0.35$ , 95% CI  $[0.106, 0.611]$ ). These findings confirmed our results.

## 6 | Discussion

Our research explores the complex dynamics of evaluations of creative employees' promotability, emphasizing the pivotal role of leaders' affect-based trust and control appraisals. Although the literature has often treated creative behavior as only one facet of job performance, assuming that excellent creative employees will naturally be promoted (Guillén and Kunze 2019; Rodrigues and Rebelo 2023), our study highlights the unique challenges posed by the nonconformist nature of these employees in promotability evaluations. The findings of our field survey and business simulation experiment support our trust-based promotability evaluation model, highlighting the pivotal role of affect-based trust in fostering positive evaluations of creative employees' promotability. Our findings also reveal that leaders' control appraisals significantly moderate the relationship between employees' creative behavior and affect-based trust, ultimately influencing promotability evaluations. In particular, leaders with high control appraisals, who are confident in their ability to manage risks and potential disruptions, are more likely to form affect-based trust in their creative employees, leading to positive promotability evaluations. Below, we discuss the theoretical implications, practical implications, and limitations of our study, as well as future research directions.

### 6.1 | Theoretical Implications

Our study makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature. First, it provides a novel perspective on the evaluations of creative employees' promotability. Research has often examined creative behavior as a key dimension of employees' job performance (Aryee et al. 2012; Welbourne et al. 1998), assuming a positive relationship between creativity and promotability (e.g., Guillén and Kunze 2019; Rodrigues and Rebelo 2023; Seibert et al. 2001). However, by shedding light on the dual nature of creative behavior—its inherent nonconformity and the consequent threat it poses to the status quo (e.g., Grant 2017)—our research calls for a more nuanced understanding of this relationship.

Specifically, the nonconformist nature of creative individuals embodies the potential for disruption and unpredictability when they occupy higher-level roles (Grant 2017). We argue that this uncertainty may create a dilemma for leaders who must evaluate the risks and benefits of promoting such creative employees, striking a balance between fostering innovation and maintaining stability. Our study thus challenges the conventional view that creativity is always viewed positively (Harari et al. 2016; Sarooghi et al. 2015; Tellis et al. 2009), suggesting that the nonconformist nature of creative employees may adversely affect their promotability. This suggestion provides a fresh perspective to the management literature, enriching the understanding of the complex relationship between employee creativity and career advancement.

Second, our study enhances the theoretical discourse on trust in promotability evaluations. Although research has extensively examined trust within organizations (Fulmer and Gelfand 2012; Kong et al. 2014; McAllister 1995), our research extends this exploration to evaluations of creative employees'

promotability, a topic that has received little attention in the literature. Research has largely adopted a meritocratic contest lens, emphasizing that creativity signals employees' ability and reliability, implications that closely align with cognition-based trust (e.g., Miller et al. 2005; Ng and Feldman 2014). In keeping with this tradition, we include cognition-based trust as a control mediator in our model, and our findings confirm that cognition-based trust plays a critical role in promotability evaluations. Importantly, we extend this line of research by highlighting that the inherently nonconformist nature of creativity often involves breaking rules, challenging norms, and deviating from established routines, thus introducing greater uncertainty among leaders. Under these conditions, affect-based trust—the emotional bond and mutual care between leaders and employees (McAllister 1995)—becomes essential. Our results can help improve traditional promotability evaluations, which rely heavily on cognition-based assessments of “good reasons” or evidence (Miller et al. 2005), and emphasize the importance of emotional connections in the effective management and promotion of creative individuals in the field of human resource management (HRM).

Third, our study extends the understanding of the role of differences between leaders in their evaluations of employees' promotability. Research in this field has largely focused on the capabilities and behaviors of employees being evaluated for promotion (Huang et al. 2018; Ng and Feldman 2010; Xu et al. 2023), paying less attention to differences between their evaluators—their leaders. By introducing the moderating role of leaders' control appraisals (Frese and Fay 2001; Parker et al. 2006), we highlight how leaders' personal characteristics shape the process and outcomes of promotion evaluations for creative employees. By highlighting the critical role of leader characteristics, we extend contest mobility theory by incorporating insights from sponsor mobility theory, offering a psychologically grounded framework for understanding when creativity facilitates versus constrains promotability. Furthermore, it offers a springboard for future research to investigate the influence of individual differences among leaders on various HRM decisions and outcomes, suggesting that organizations should consider the psychological characteristics of their leaders when planning and implementing talent development strategies.

Moreover, our findings contribute more specifically to research on individual control appraisals in two ways. On the one hand, we broaden the scope of control appraisals beyond their examined effects on personal initiative (Parker et al. 2006) and risk-taking behaviors (Frese and Fay 2001). Although leaders' control appraisals directly strengthen their affect-based trust, their moderating role in shaping how creativity influences trust is pivotal. Leaders with high control appraisals—those who believe they can effectively influence outcomes and manage challenges—are more confident in their ability to handle the uncertainties and potential risks posed by creative employees. Therefore, they tend to interpret creative behaviors as opportunities to drive innovation, thereby amplifying trust, while those with low control appraisals perceive the same behaviors as destabilizing threats. This interaction underscores that creativity's impact on trust is not inherent but contingent on leaders' psychological readiness to manage uncertainty. This finding highlights the broader implications of control appraisals, indicating

that they play a critical role not only in guiding individual actions but also in shaping leaders' judgments and evaluations of their team members' behaviors.

On the other hand, using Study 2, we demonstrate through experimental manipulations that environmental cues can significantly shape leaders' control appraisals. This finding indicates that control appraisals are not fixed traits but are malleable and can be influenced by contextual factors. This finding extends the understanding of control appraisals by suggesting that organizations can use various interventions to manage and actively cultivate their leaders' sense of control. By strategically modifying the work environment or implementing specific training programs, organizations can improve leaders' control appraisals, potentially improving managerial promotion decisions and overall organizational innovation.

Beyond establishing the malleability and moderating role of control appraisals, our findings shed light on the broader theoretical debate between the contest and sponsor mobility perspectives in explaining creative employees' career advancement. Specifically, our finding that affect-based trust operates above and beyond cognition-based trust suggests that sponsor mobility dynamics may be particularly salient for creative employees. Although their competence is recognized (as evidenced by the significant effect of cognition-based trust on promotability), whether that competence translates into advancement depends critically on their leaders' willingness to form emotional bonds, a process contingent on the leaders' control appraisals. This suggests that the contest and sponsor mobility perspectives are not mutually exclusive but rather operate in tandem, with sponsor mobility processes determining whether meritocratic potential is realized.

## 6.2 | Practical Implications

Our research offers several practical implications for organizations. First, our findings suggest that individual biases and differences, rather than employees' creative performance alone, influence leaders' decisions regarding whether to promote creative employees. To account for this fact, organizations may wish to develop clear and objective criteria for evaluating employee creativity, such as metrics related to innovative contributions, problem-solving abilities, and collaboration skills. These criteria should be applied consistently throughout the organization. In addition, organizations could use diverse committees for promotion decisions rather than relying solely on leaders' assessments. This approach could mitigate the influence of biases from a single leader.

Furthermore, organizations may consider implementing anonymous or "blind" evaluation procedures, in which employees' identifying information (e.g., name, gender, or departmental affiliation) is concealed during performance assessments. By ensuring that leaders evaluate employees solely based on the quality of their creative output, such procedures can help reduce the influence of personal biases (e.g., leaders' control appraisals) on evaluation judgments. Implementing blind evaluations can therefore promote greater fairness and objectivity in recognizing

creativity and foster an inclusive climate that encourages employees to share creative ideas without worrying about differential treatment.

Second, our research indicates that leaders with higher control appraisals are more likely to establish affect-based trust and promote creative employees. To cultivate this mindset in leaders, organizations could grant them greater autonomy in decision-making regarding employee creativity and innovative projects. This increased authority could strengthen leaders' belief in their ability to influence their work domain, especially regarding creative outcomes. In addition, organizations could offer training programs aimed at enhancing leaders' skills in fostering creativity, managing risks, and supporting creative teams. Equipping leaders with the necessary knowledge and tools could increase their confidence in their ability to effectively manage creative employees.

Finally, creative employees could take proactive measures to address their leaders' concerns about their nonconformist work and strengthen leaders' control appraisals when evaluating creative work. Specifically, employees should proactively communicate the process behind their creative ideas, clarify how their work fits into organizational goals, and provide clear evidence of the potential value and impact of their creative contributions, including data, metrics, or examples of successful outcomes. This approach can help leaders better understand that the development and implementation of creative ideas remain under their control. Furthermore, employees could acknowledge the risks associated with their initiatives and demonstrate a thoughtful approach to risk management, including identifying mitigation strategies and alternative approaches. In doing so, employees can help leaders perceive less risk in supporting their creative behaviors.

## 6.3 | Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although our research makes theoretical contributions and has practical implications, it also has certain limitations. First, although we adopted a multi-method research design combining a field survey and an experiment to enhance our study's internal and external validity (Wellman et al. 2023), both studies were conducted exclusively in China. This cultural context limits the generalizability of our findings to other cultural contexts. Indeed, cross-cultural research has suggested that the concept of creativity can be defined, assessed, and endorsed differently across cultures (Loewenstein and Mueller 2016; Lubart 1999). For instance, Loewenstein and Mueller (2016) demonstrated that compared with Americans, who measure creativity largely on novelty cues, the Chinese generally have a broader view of creativity that goes beyond novelty to include attributes such as rarity, mass market appeal, and being fun to use. Hence, there may be cultural differences in the perceptions and evaluations of employees' creative behavior. We encourage future research to investigate the proposed trust-based promotability model in different cultural contexts. Such an extension would enable a better understanding of the interplay between cultural norms, leader differences, and evaluations of creative behavior.

Second, our theoretical model proposes a multistep, trust-based promotability evaluation process conducted exclusively by

leaders. Although measuring the key constructs of this model using leader responses in our field study would have been theoretically optimal, it could have raised concerns about common method variance (Podsakoff et al. 2003).<sup>11</sup> To mitigate these concerns, we implemented a time-lagged design to introduce temporal separation, and we controlled for leaders' personal attributes in our analyses. We also conducted an experiment to further establish internal validity. Despite these efforts, we may not have completely eliminated common method variance. Therefore, we recommend that future research adopt longitudinal data collection designs to validate the proposed model. A minor point is that although our manipulation of noncreative behavior was rated significantly lower than that of creative behavior, its absolute score was slightly above a moderate level. Future studies could develop experimental materials that clearly contrast highly creative behavior and routine, low creative behavior.

Furthermore, although our experimental design focused on isolating the effect of novelty by keeping usefulness constant, future research could disentangle the independent and interaction effects of novelty and usefulness.<sup>12</sup> For example, researchers could examine how leaders evaluate employees who propose highly novel ideas of questionable usefulness, compared with those who propose incrementally novel but highly useful solutions. Leaders may perceive incremental creativity, which involves small, continuous improvements, differently from how they perceive radical creativity, which entails groundbreaking and disruptive innovation (Madjar et al. 2011; Mumford and Gustafson 1988). This raises a crucial question in promotability contexts: Would leaders be more tolerant of performance ambiguity when the idea is highly novel? Exploring such dynamics would deepen our understanding of how different "profiles" of creativity shape career outcomes.

Finally, our findings provide initial evidence that leaders' affect-based trust is a critical mechanism linking employees' creative behavior to their promotability. However, future research could consider other potential factors, such as leaders' appreciation or identification with their employees, which could also influence their decisions regarding whether to promote creative employees. Moreover, our findings open a new avenue of research on the role of leader differences (e.g., control appraisals) as boundary conditions for the relationship between employees' creative behavior and promotability. To advance this line of research, studies could explore additional leader differences, such as risk preference and regulatory focus, to better understand how these factors influence leaders' perceptions of employees' creative behavior. By exploring these alternative explanations, scholars could provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of the relationship between employees' creative behavior and their promotion prospects.

## 7 | Conclusion

This study reveals that evaluating the promotability of creative employees is a challenging yet crucial task. It highlights the complexity surrounding the decision-making process and underscores that leaders' affect-based trust and control appraisals are essential. Our findings indicate that leaders with high control appraisals are

more likely to develop close emotional bonds with creative employees and promote them, as these leaders have more confidence in their ability to manage the risks and potential disruptions associated with this type of talent. Consequently, leaders' control appraisals emerge as a critical determining factor in the evaluations of creative employees' promotability. This research offers a novel perspective and represents a significant advance in understanding the dynamics of promoting creative talent.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework (OSF) at [https://osf.io/q4swu/overview?view\\_only=8fdb5193918466ba6bb5017642d2943](https://osf.io/q4swu/overview?view_only=8fdb5193918466ba6bb5017642d2943).

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Although cognition-based trust was not the main focus of our study, we empirically incorporated it into our field study (Study 1) as a control mediator to ensure a comprehensive investigation of the phenomenon.
- <sup>2</sup> To ensure translation accuracy, we implemented a three-step process. Initially, a bilingual individual translated the English items into Chinese, and a second bilingual individual reviewed and made minor edits to the translations. Subsequently, a third bilingual individual performed a back-translation from Chinese to English, and all three bilingual individuals collaborated to resolve any minor discrepancies through consensus. Finally, an HR manager from the surveyed company reviewed the items to confirm their suitability to their company's work context.
- <sup>3</sup> We thank the review team for raising concerns about the confounding factors of trustworthiness, including perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity.
- <sup>4</sup> Supplementary analyses exploring leader–employee alignment in terms of age, gender, and education level—calculated as the absolute differences between leaders' and employees' attributes—revealed no significant effect on the hypothesized relationships.
- <sup>5</sup> Following the reviewer's suggestion to include cognition-based trust, the CFA results revealed that the five-factor model comprising employees' creative behavior, leaders' control appraisals, leaders' affect-based trust, leaders' cognition-based trust, and employee promotability had an acceptable fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 738.71$ ,  $df = 314$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.35$ , CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06). Moreover, this model demonstrated better fit indices than alternative models, indicating that these five constructs were empirically distinct.
- <sup>6</sup> We applied pre-screening criteria using the managerial experience filter provided by Credamo.
- <sup>7</sup> Preregistration materials are available at [https://aspredicted.org/RS1\\_4ZF](https://aspredicted.org/RS1_4ZF) and [https://aspredicted.org/DZQ\\_XQR](https://aspredicted.org/DZQ_XQR).
- <sup>8</sup> The scale letters (O, E, A, B, C, D, F) were sequentially assigned numerical values from 7 to 1 for subsequent analysis.
- <sup>10</sup> We assessed leaders' cognition-based trust in employees using the same scale as in Study 1 (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). A  $2 \times 2$  analysis of

variance indicated that the interaction between creative behavior and leader control appraisal had no significant effect on cognition-based trust,  $F(1, 537) = 3.76, p = 0.053, \eta^2 = 0.01$ . This result was consistent with the findings of Study 1, providing additional support for our hypothesized model.

<sup>10</sup> In the robustness analysis, we retained 1 iteration out of 10 to form the final posterior distribution using THIN=10 in Mplus. This was done to maintain low autocorrelation for each model parameter sampled in the MCMC process over the number of iterations.

<sup>11</sup> Harman's single-factor test indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for only 16.03% of the total variance, which is well below the 40% threshold. This suggests that common method bias was unlikely to be a major issue (Fuller et al. 2016; Podsakoff et al. 2003).

<sup>12</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.

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