

# The Missing Link in Sustainable Change: Leveraging Displayed Perspective-Taking for Technological Transformation

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**Purpose** – Aiming to deepen understanding of managerial communication strategies that can foster transformational change while enhancing employee wellbeing, we examine whether managers’ perspective-taking displays, intended to regulate employees’ emotions, mitigate resistance to robotization, and we explore the psychological mechanisms underlying this effect.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To test the model, an experimental study was conducted with 203 participants. The collected data were analyzed using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) to test sequential mediation.

**Findings** – This study revealed that displayed perspective-taking by managers reduces turnover intentions in employees. Displays of perspective-taking increase psychological safety, which in turn attenuates anger and fear and, indirectly, turnover intentions and sabotage.

**Research limitations/implications** – While the experimental design supports internal validity, the use of vignettes limits ecological realism and the generalizability of findings beyond the studied context. Additionally, the findings may not generalize to cultural contexts different from those studied.

**Practical implications** – This model offers valuable managerial insights by demonstrating how interpersonal emotion regulation strategies, particularly displayed perspective-taking, can effectively address employees' resistance to robotization during organizational change.

**Originality/value** – Prior work has largely treated emotional displays as dispositional leadership traits rather than deliberate communicative strategies. This study extends that literature by examining displayed perspective-taking as an intentional interpersonal emotion regulation practice enacted during change communication. This study expands the arsenal of change communication strategies to facilitate employee acceptance of digital change in organizations. Demonstrating managers' interpersonal emotion regulation as a viable approach underscores the importance of incorporating emotion regulation into strategies to foster acceptance during organizational change. Additionally, it highlights the mechanism by which psychological safety influences employee resistance.

**Keywords:** *Resistance, Interpersonal Emotion Regulation, Organizational Change, Robotization, Leadership*

## **1. Introduction**

Change is a constant in today's business world. It is an emotionally charged event (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996), often accompanied by stress, anxiety, and uncertainty about the causes, implementation, and outcomes (Jimmieson *et al.*, 2004). In an era defined by digital innovations, emerging technologies are driving the digital changes and transformation of businesses and organizations (Jedynak *et al.*, 2021). One notable advantage of digital technologies, such as robotics, is their potential to enhance operational efficiency, a key factor for sustaining a competitive edge (Chou *et al.*, 2023), and a prevalent reason for their increased adoption by organizations.

Robotization represents one such context, a form of technological change that may lead employees to feel threatened and resist its implementation. These reactions are frequently accompanied by stress, anxiety, fears of job displacement, and concerns about changes in their routines or status (Lammi, 2021; Schneider and Sting, 2020). As a result, employees may respond to change-related communications with heightened negative emotions, including fear and anger, which may precede behavioral responses such as resistance (Hornung and Smolnik, 2022).

Not only do these negative emotions stall readiness to change (Chou *et al.*, 2023), but they also negatively affect employee well-being by contributing to emotional exhaustion, distress, and even depression (Hornung and Smolnik, 2022). These emotional experiences prompt employees to leave their jobs or exhibit aggression, reinforcing a cycle of resistance that hinders skill acquisition (González-Gómez and Hudson, 2024). Yet, resistance to change is not inherently dysfunctional: in some cases, it serves as a constructive response allowing employees to voice legitimate concerns, highlight overlooked risks, or advocate for alternative solutions that can improve implementation outcomes (Downs, 2012). Nevertheless, in many organizational contexts, particularly those involving disruptive technological change, resistance is often expressed in harmful ways, such as turnover or sabotage, posing serious risks for the success of the change process and the organization. Because resistance is inherently emotional, addressing the negative emotions that arise during robotization processes is key to fostering acceptance (Steigenberger, 2015). We propose that leaders have a fundamental role in shaping employees' emotional and behavioral reactions, notably through change communication processes.

Communication of change is a fundamental organizational process for addressing employees' attitudes and dispositions towards change (Armenakis and Hankis, 2002; Lauzier *et al.*, 2020).

Yet, empirical studies on the effects of communicating change are scarce (Da Ros *et al.*, 2023; Oreg *et al.*, 2011). Most of them have adopted a rational approach to change communication, assuming that employee resistance can be addressed through rational, cognitive strategies, such as engaging employees in decision-making to encourage participation (van Dijk and van Dick, 2009). While these assumptions are partially accurate, recent studies suggest that these strategies overlook the emotional factors that influence resistance (Oreg and Michel, 2023; van Dam, 2018). The few studies measuring effects on emotions have examined how such communications affect appraisals of change to increase positive emotions (Harikkala-Laihin, 2022; Onyeneke and Abe, 2021), overlooking how negative emotions can be attenuated (Armenakis and Harris, 2002).

Research on leadership has increasingly focused on how managers' traits and communication styles shape employees' emotional responses (Liu *et al.*, 2023). For instance, emotional intelligence and empathy are widely recognized as important leadership qualities that facilitate successful change processes (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Van Dierendonck, 2011). These perspectives emphasize leaders' emotional awareness and their capacity to understand followers' experiences. However, they largely conceptualize perspective-taking and empathy as dispositional traits rather than as communicative behaviors that managers can intentionally enact during change communication, regardless of their actual traits.

Relatedly, leadership research has examined how leaders regulate their own and others' emotions (Bradley *et al.*, 2024; Haver *et al.*, 2013; Humphrey, 2012). Yet, fewer studies have explored their deliberate attempts to regulate others' emotions during workplace interactions. This process is conceptualized in the literature as interpersonal emotion regulation (IER), or the intentional effort to influence another person's emotional state through communication and interaction (Niven, 2017; Zaki and Williams, 2013).

Although IER offers leaders a strategic approach to curbing resistance, it has yet to be studied in the context of organizational change. We extend the communicative perspectives on change (Jabri *et al.*, 2008; Muthusamy, 2019) and integrate insights from leadership and interpersonal emotional regulation scholarship by focusing on displays of perspective-taking, a central IER strategy. In doing so, we treat perspective-taking as a communicative act through which managers convey understanding, validation, and care. This distinction is theoretically significant because it captures how emotions are regulated between people rather than simply within them (Humphrey, 2012).

We argue that displays of perspective-taking operationalize the relational work that enables employees to reinterpret threatening transformations, such as robotization, as meaningful and manageable (Smollan and Morrison, 2019). These displays of perspective-taking can attenuate fear and anger and, indirectly, the resistant behaviors associated with these emotions (withdrawal and sabotage, respectively). Further, we propose that this effect is underpinned by psychological safety: perceiving a psychologically safe environment reduces fear and anger, thereby attenuating resistance to robotization. While perspective taking may not always be beneficial in every context -for instance, it can sometimes increase anxiety or lead to inaccurate assumptions about others' thoughts and feelings (Galinsky *et al.*, 2008)- we theorize that it is particularly effective in attenuating resistance in the context of robotization. As a change process that radically disrupts employees' way of work, robotization blurs distinctions between human and nonhuman actors, destabilizing established assumptions about agency, autonomy, and control (Hancock *et al.*, 2011). Different from other technologies, robotization not only produces anxiety but also creates a sense of existential threat (Hancock *et al.*, 2011). Emotional responses to robotization are therefore more acute and less predictable than those observed in other change processes, because robotization

challenges human–human dynamics and role structures (Jin, 2024). We find support for these arguments in an experimental study.

Our study contributes to research on organizational change communication by extending the lens of interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) to the study of technology-driven change. While prior work has largely treated employees' emotions as outcomes of change communication, we shift attention to managers' emotional displays as deliberate communicative inputs that can shape those reactions. In doing so, we reconceptualize perspective-taking not simply as a dispositional leadership trait emphasized in empathy or emotional intelligence frameworks, but as an intentional regulatory practice that managers can enact during change communication. This perspective extends existing research on leader emotional influence by proposing the mechanisms through which managers' emotional displays may shape employees' responses to change. Specifically, we provide initial experimental evidence that psychological safety serves as a relational mechanism through which perspective-taking attenuates fear and anger and, indirectly, resistance behaviors. **This work thus speaks to scholars and practitioners navigating the human side of technological transformation.**

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### *2.1 Organizational Change, Resistance, and Leadership Strategies*

Resistance to transformational changes, such as robotization, may stem from fears of job loss and uncertainty (Borges and Quintas, 2020). Resistance to change is a multi-dimensional construct, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (Piderit, 2000). While cognitive aspects are well-studied, emotional responses such as anxiety, anger, and fear, are often overlooked (Oreg and Michel, 2023; van Dam, 2018). Fear, associated with avoidance tendencies, often leads to passive resistance such as withdrawal, disengagement,

or turnover intentions (Carver and Harmon-Jones, 2009). In the context of organizational change, fear may stem from uncertainty, perceived lack of control, or anticipated loss of status (Klarner *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, anger is linked to action tendencies and may drive active resistance (e.g., sabotage or confrontation) (Marsh *et al.*, 2005; Oreg, 2006).

Communication of change plays a critical role in shaping employees' perceptions and emotional responses to change (Armenakis and Harris, 2002; Lauzier *et al.*, 2020). Foundational models of communication of change foreground the relevance of "telling and selling change" (Armenakis and Harris, 2002) by, for instance, justifying its necessity in order to foster positive attitudes and raise readiness to change among employees (Abrell-Vogel and Rowold, 2014). This literature has also demonstrated that interpersonal communications are preferred by employees (Allen *et al.*, 2007).

Communication during change also performs an emotional and sensemaking function, shaping how employees interpret and feel about transformation (Jabri *et al.*, 2008; Muthusamy, 2019). From a dialogic perspective, change communication is not merely about persuading employees to comply but about co-constructing shared meaning through genuine and empathetic exchanges (Jabri *et al.*, 2008). In this regard, positive and emotionally attuned communication, such as the use of supportive language, stories, and metaphors, has been shown to foster trust, optimism, and psychological readiness for change (Muthusamy, 2019). Similarly, leaders' supportive and subordinate-oriented communication styles enhance employees' affective commitment and mitigate resistance (Luo *et al.*, 2016), highlighting the relational and affective core of effective change communication. Furthermore, successful change initiatives often depend on how communication practices resonate with organizational culture and employees' emotional experiences (Smollan and Morrison, 2019). When employees perceive openness, empathy, and participative dialogue, they are more

likely to interpret change, even disruptive forms such as robotization, as an opportunity rather than a threat. In line with the view that resistance is an inherent and emotionally charged part of the change process (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017), we propose that managers' IER plays a crucial role in transforming employees' affective reactions into engagement and adaptive behavior.

We argue that a focus on managers' emotional displays is particularly relevant in the context of robotization, a high-uncertainty change characterized by heightened emotional intensity and identity threat (Hancock *et al.*, 2011; Steigenberger, 2015). While other forms of technological change may produce similar emotional dynamics, robotization provides a theoretically appropriate and practically relevant context for examining IER strategies, given the acuteness of employees' emotional responses (Cieslak and Valor, 2025). IER provides a theoretical and managerial framework for change communication, as it examines the communication strategies intentionally employed to mitigate others' emotions. By implementing these strategies, leaders can mitigate resistance to change and promote a more adaptive and resilient workforce (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2016), as explained next.

## *2.2 Interpersonal Emotion Regulation*

IER involves intentionally influencing another person's emotional state (Zaki and Williams, 2013). Grounded in but extending beyond intrapersonal emotion regulation (Gross, 1998), IER is distinct from social support, empathy, and prosocial behavior because it represents communication specifically oriented toward modifying others' emotions within interpersonal interactions (Niven, 2017). This specificity is reflected in the four key traits of IER that are not considered in related constructs: it regulates emotions, targets affect, is intentional, and is directed at a recipient (Niven, 2017). IER strategies can be classified into affect-improving and affect-worsening (Niven *et al.*, 2009). Affect-improving strategies, such as active listening and

supportive conversations, foster positive emotions and enhance the individual's sense of competence.

While IER can enhance inclusion and connection, its effectiveness may vary across cultural and situational contexts (Liddell and Williams, 2019), because cultural differences may incline individuals' preferences for some regulation strategies (Bebko *et al.*, 2019; De Leersnyder *et al.*, 2013; Matsumoto *et al.*, 2008). Research shows that individuals who endorse collectivistic values, emphasizing hierarchy and group harmony, are more likely to use suppression, whereas those with individualistic and egalitarian orientations tend to prefer reappraisal and open emotional expression (Klein *et al.*, 2023). This occurs because members of collectivistic cultures demonstrate heightened sensitivity to anger displays, as such expressions can threaten ingroup harmony, a central cultural value. These cultural variations also affect how individuals receive interpersonal emotion strategies, because emotions are co-regulated within their social contexts (Matsumoto *et al.*, 2008). For instance, individualistic cultures correlate with extraversion and openness (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004), which may lead members of these cultures to seek out more emotion-eliciting situations and to experience a broader range of emotional states than members of collectivistic cultures. Consequently, emotion regulation practices should be adapted to specific cultural contexts, reflecting broader cultural values and social structures.

We focus on a core strategy within IER that may have particular relevance across cultures, displayed perspective-taking, as it enables understanding, forecasting, and regulating others' emotions (Johnson, 1975; Zaki, 2020). Employees interacting with managers who display perspective-taking may perceive that the manager understands them and validates their emotions, which in turn, fosters a sense of being heard and respected. Such interpersonal signals help create a safe environment in which employees feel free to express themselves

without fear of negative consequences, thereby increasing their perceived psychological safety at work (Parker *et al.*, 2008).

Given its interpersonal and emotional nature, displayed perspective-taking may appear similar to other constructs such as empathy, emotional intelligence, or servant leadership. However, distinguishing displayed perspective-taking as an IER strategy from these related concepts is essential to clarify its unique theoretical and practical implications. Specifically, empathy, a fundamental trait of inclusive and servant leadership, refers to the capacity to feel with others and often drives prosocial behavior through affective resonance (Zaki, 2020). Servant leadership reflects an other-oriented approach that prioritizes followers' needs, growth, and well-being over leaders' self-interest, grounded in moral responsibility and authentic care for others (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Within this framework, perspective-taking is central to the interpersonal acceptance dimension, representing leaders' capacity to adopt others' viewpoints and respond with empathy, compassion, and forgiveness (Van Dierendonck, 2011). However, whereas servant leadership emphasizes this quality as part of a broader moral orientation toward others, displayed perspective-taking as an IER strategy (our focus) is a communicative display of understanding and validation that may or may not correspond with a leader's dispositional trait.

IER, including displayed perspective-taking, is also conceptually distinct from emotional intelligence and broader leadership styles. EI has long been associated with leadership effectiveness and positive team outcomes, as it allows leaders to manage emotional exchanges that sustain motivation and relational cohesion (Barling *et al.*, 2000). Leaders high in EI can identify emotional cues, regulate their responses, and use this awareness to guide interpersonal interactions that sustain motivation and trust (Goleman and Cherniss, 2024).

While emotional intelligence refers to leaders' ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions, a relatively stable individual capability (Mayer and Salovey, 1997), IER focuses on the specific interpersonal strategies leaders deliberately employ to influence others' emotions in real-time interactions (Niven, 2017). Similarly, while transformational or authentic leadership styles describe overarching behavioral patterns (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Bass, 1985), IER captures the tactical, situational deployment of emotion regulation strategies during specific change communications. This distinction is critical because it positions managers' emotional displays not as personality traits or general leadership orientations, but as malleable, trainable behaviors that can be strategically applied during technological change. Displays of perspective-taking may not necessarily be enacted by leaders high in emotional intelligence. Indeed, managers can explicitly state that they are aware and accept employees' negative emotions, even when they personally may not understand or accept them.

Displayed perspective-taking provides an alternative approach to leadership communication of change, as it does not require leaders to possess strong dispositional empathy. Leaders' communication of care, vision, and enthusiasm, creates trust among employees regardless of whether these leaders are high or low in empathy as a trait (Men *et al.*, 2020). By focusing on IER, this study shows that leaders can intentionally shape employees' feelings to attenuate employee resistance during transformation. We contend that displays of perspective-taking may mitigate negative emotional reactions to robotization and the behaviors it produces (Malik *et al.*, 2022; Schneider and Sting, 2020).

To explain how such strategies take effect, we propose that interpersonal emotion regulation operates through specific psychological mechanisms. We defend that one of these mechanisms is psychological safety, defined as the shared belief that the interpersonal

environment is safe for risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). Importantly, psychological safety is distinct from related constructs such as trust and organizational support: while trust reflects an individual's willingness to be vulnerable to another party (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998), and organizational support reflects perceptions of the organization's commitment to employee wellbeing (Rhoades and Eisenberg, 2002), psychological safety is specifically relational and context-specific, emerging from interpersonal interactions rather than structural conditions. In the context of organizational change, psychological safety captures the extent to which individuals feel secure enough to express concerns and engage constructively with threatening transitions (Newman *et al.*, 2017). Rooted in interpersonal workplace relationships (Kahn, 1990), psychological safety is shaped by managers' behaviors and may thus be affected by displayed perspective-taking. Psychological safety has been shown as an antecedent of other employee outcomes, such as voice behavior (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009) and job engagement (Frazier *et al.*, 2017). In line with these research findings, we propose that psychological safety arises when employees believe that they are supported by managers (Serhan *et al.*, 2025), which, in turn, curbs employees' emotions of anger and fear, thereby decreasing resistance. Psychological safety plays a crucial role in this process, as it shapes employees' emotional responses to change. When employees perceive a psychologically safe environment, they are more likely to experience calm and openness rather than anxiety or defensiveness (Rozman and Tominc, 2022; Serhan *et al.*, 2024). Prior studies show that low psychological safety heightens emotional distress during organizational change (Rozman and Tominc, 2022), whereas high psychological safety alleviates threat perceptions and fosters readiness for change (Palanski and Vogelgesang, 2011). Building on this evidence, we argue that psychological safety mediates the relationship between leaders' displays of perspective-taking and employees' emotional responses: by communicating

understanding and validation of employees' emotions, leaders enhance employees' feelings of security, which reduces fear- and anger-driven resistance and facilitates constructive engagement with change.

We further differentiate between two forms of resistance, passive and active, each associated with the emotions underpinning resistance -fear and anger, respectively- (Steigenberger, 2015). We measure *passive* resistant behavior as turnover intentions, reflecting internal dissatisfaction without direct confrontation or active opposition (Fugate *et al.*, 2010). The perceived threat of robotization acts as a psychological shock, generating uncertainty and fear about job security. Recent research has shown that fear of being replaced by robots is positively associated with turnover intentions, particularly in workplaces where robotization is already in place (Horpynich *et al.*, 2025; Sun and Deng, 2024). Industry-wide research further confirms that perceived risks related to automation and service robots contribute to higher turnover rates (Shum *et al.*, 2024), underscoring the role of job insecurity and fear in shaping employees' passive resistance.

We also measure *active* resistance, which often manifests as sabotage or actions that damage, disrupt, or subvert an organization's operations for personal reasons (Crino, 1994). Anger arises when employees perceive robots as a threat to workplace power and autonomy (Hornung and Smolnik, 2022); moreover, robots continuously monitor performance and extract tacit employee knowledge (Lammi, 2021; Pfeiffer, 2016), intensifying these threats. As a result, anger may prompt employees to take retaliatory action against the perceived wrong (Marsh *et al.*, 2005; Oreg, 2006). Indeed, past studies document incidents of employees attacking robots in response to perceived threats (Jin, 2024). We also consider existing research that highlights the passive tendencies associated with anger (Zinner *et al.*, 2008). Anger may not only galvanize overt actions like sabotage but also motivate employee

behaviors such as turnover intention. Thus, anger may manifest in both approach-oriented actions and avoidance-related outcomes, depending on how employees perceive their capacity to address the source of their anger effectively.

Accordingly, we expect that displayed perspective-taking will differentially influence these emotions and, in turn, indirectly influence employee behavior. Consistent with prior research (Sun and Deng, 2024), fear is likely to lead to passive resistance, such as turnover intentions, due to its avoidance-oriented nature (Lazarus and Folkman, 1991). In contrast, as an attack (approach) emotion that makes individuals prone to engage in action (Frijda, 1995), anger can lead to active resistant work behaviors, such as sabotage (Marsh *et al.*, 2005).

Based on these arguments, we formally hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who are exposed to a manager who displays perspective taking will have (a) lower turnover intentions and (b) sabotage intentions than individuals who are exposed to a manager who displays indifference following a robotization process.

Hypothesis 2a: Psychologically safety and fear serially mediate the relationship between a manager who displays perspective taking and turnover intentions following a robotization process.

Hypothesis 2b: Psychologically safety and anger serially mediate the relationship between a manager who displays perspective taking and turnover intentions and sabotage following a robotization process.

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Procedure and Participants*

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment with two conditions (the manager's displayed perspective-taking *versus* indifference). We used Prolific to collect data

from a sample of US full-time employees. Participants were paid \$11,3 USD/hour to participate in our study. While appropriate for testing our hypotheses, this cultural context may constrain the broader generalizability of the results. We therefore interpret our findings with this scope in mind. Participants were ensured confidentiality of their responses, and the experiment received IRB approval from the second author's institution (# 20244355).

To strengthen the validity of our study, the development of the experimental scenarios was informed by fieldwork in organizations undergoing robotization. While the data collected during this fieldwork are not analyzed in the present paper, our direct observations of implementation processes and informal conversations with managers informed the design of the scenarios. These insights directly shaped the wording and framing of our manipulation scenarios, ensuring they reflected realistic concerns and organizational dynamics. By grounding our manipulations in actual organizational practices, we aimed to capture the lived dynamics of leader communication in ways that enhance both transparency and replicability of our findings. Furthermore, the scenarios were pilot tested with 40 participants recruited via Prolific<sup>1</sup>. After reading the description of the study and providing consent, all participants read an introductory paragraph:

*You are working in a manufacturing company that assembles airplane parts for the aviation industry. You have just been called to a meeting with your production-plant manager that leads the factory you work at. After a brief introduction, your manager*

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<sup>1</sup> We recruited 40 US employees working full-time via Prolific. They were on average 43.33 years old (SD = 11.47) and 48% were female. Participants in this pre-test were compensated as participants in the final sample. After being ensured anonymity and confidentiality, they were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (perspective-taking manager vs indifference manager). Next, they answered the manipulation check questions and demographics. The mean of the perceived perspective taking used by the manager was significantly higher in the perspective-taking manager condition (M = 5.05, SD = 1.06) than in the indifferent manager condition (M = 3.74, SD = 1.77,  $t(38) = 2.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, participants in the indifferent manager condition perceived a marginally higher indifference (M = 4.40, SD = 2.01) than participants in the perspective-taking manager condition (M = 3.35, SD = 1.29,  $t(38) = -2.01$ ,  $p = .052$ ).

*announced that: "Starting from next month on, the company will introduce robotics in the factory." Your manager explained that the reasons to introduce this robot are based on helping the company be more competitive, cutting costs, and increase value for customers.*

They were then randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. In the displayed perspective-taking manager scenario, participants additionally read:

*Your manager further told you that: "We are well aware of the hard work you do every day, with many hours in the factory, dealing with physical and mental strain, I can imagine how tiring this might be." Your manager further told you: "If I put myself in your shoes, I see why you might feel threatened...and I understand that you may feel anxious and worried about this robot, but I can assure you that you will not be displaced or suffer from this change. On the contrary, our hope is that you have better working conditions." After presenting the implementation plan, the meeting was over and everyone went back to work.*

In the indifferent manager scenario, participants read:

*Your manager further told you that: "We are well aware that you are all used to work in your own way; in the end, it's just repetitive work, nothing more." Your manager further told you: "I can tell you that this project was approved by the director, according to the company vision. This is all you need to know. In fact, the company's goal is that this robot will allow you to produce more in less time." After presenting the implementation plan, the meeting was over and everyone went back to work.*

Next, participants completed a short survey assessing the mediators and dependent variables, the manipulation check, and demographics. Male participants comprised 51.7% of the sample, with participants having a mean age of 39.5 years ( $SD = 10.6$ ). The questionnaire

incorporated three attention checks<sup>2</sup>. All participants successfully passed these attention checks.

### *3.2 Measures*

All measures were based on scales adapted from prior literature. Responses to all items were obtained using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). The independent variable (IER) was coded as 1 for manager who displays perspective taking and 0 for the indifferent manager. All measures exceeded the thresholds of reliability and validity.

#### *Dependent Variables*

*Turnover Intention.* We used the three-item scale developed by Cammann *et al.* (1979) to measure turnover intention. A sample item is “I often think of leaving this organization” ( $\alpha = .94$ ; CR = .94; AVE = .84).

*Sabotage.* The three-item scale developed by Spector *et al.*, (2006) was used to measure sabotage intentions (sample item “Purposely damage a piece of robot equipment”) ( $\alpha = .93$ ; CR = .93; AVE = .82)

#### *Mediators*

*Psychological Safety.* The six-item scale developed by Edmondson (1999) was used to measure psychological safety. The measure uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). A sample item is “If I make a mistake in this job, it is often held against me”. ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ; CR = 0.84; AVE = 0.48).

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<sup>2</sup> The attention checks were introduced with the dependent variables. The items were: “We just want you to mark number two”, “Please mark extremely likely” and “If you are reading, please mark slightly unlikely”

*Fear.* Fear was measured by averaging responses to the items jittery, nervous, distressed, scared, and afraid (Watson *et al.*, 1988) ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ; CR = 0.90; AVE = 0.66).

*Anger.* Anger was computed by averaging the items hostile, upset, and irritable (Watson *et al.*, 1988) ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ; CR = 0.82; AVE = 0.60).

### *Control Variables*

We used age (measured in years) and gender (0 = men, 1 = women) as control variables, as previous research has shown that they may influence the experience of emotions (Livingstone and Isaacowitz, 2021; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). We also added years of education, supervisory position (1 = Yes, 0 = No), current experience with robotics (1 = Yes, 0 = No), and technology competence, as they were closely related to our conceptual variables. Our results are unchanged with the addition of these variables, so for the sake of parsimony, we report our results without controls. Results with controls are available upon request.

### *3.3 Analytical Strategy*

The data was analyzed with the macro PROCESS version 4.2 (Hayes, 2022). To estimate and test the conceptual model and confirm the discriminant validity of our measurement model, we carried out confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) with Mplus version 8.6. The mediated relationships were tested, and indirect and total effects computed with bootstrapping 95% confidence intervals using the bias-corrected percentile method (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). We also replicated our analyses using structural equation modeling with AMOS version 26, and the results remain unchanged.

Before testing the hypothesis, a confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to determine the discriminant validity of our model. We tested a model with five independent factors (fear, anger, psychological safety, sabotage, turnover) against various alternative models. The five-factor model has the following fit statistics:  $\chi^2 = 315.40$ ,  $df = 159$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .07, CFI

= .95, TLI = .94 indicating a good model fit. This model had a significant better fit than the alternative model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 36.67$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ) where fear and anger were collapsed into a single “negative emotions” construct, which showed a poorer fit ( $\chi^2 = 352.07$ ,  $df = 163$ ,  $p < .01$ , RMSEA = .08, CFI = .94, TLI = .92). These results provide evidence of the good discriminant validity of our measurement model.

## **4.Results**

### *4.1 Manipulation and Randomization Checks*

We first performed randomization checks to test whether our randomization of participants in the two experimental conditions was successful. Results of a *t*-test comparing the two experimental conditions, showed that participants did not significantly differed in age ( $M_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = 38.28$ ,  $SD_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = 10.63$ ,  $M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 40.70$ ,  $SD_{\text{Indifferent}} = 10.57$ ,  $t(201) = -1.63$ ,  $p = .106$ ), gender ( $M_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = .50$ ,  $SD_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = .50$ ,  $M_{\text{Indifferent}} = .47$ ,  $SD = .50$ ,  $t(201) = 0.49$ ,  $p = .623$ ), or familiarity with technology ( $M_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = 3.93$ ,  $SD_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = 0.97$ ,  $M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 3.91$ ,  $SD_{\text{Indifferent}} = 0.97$ ,  $t(201) = 0.15$ ,  $p = .880$ ), confirming that our randomization procedure was successful.

To test the effectiveness of our experimental manipulation, we used an 8-item scale as a manipulation check. Four items were used for the perspective taking manager scenario: “My manager was aware of the hard work I do”, “My manager acknowledged and identified emotions that I may feel following the announced decision”, “My manager discussed the challenging nature of my work”, and “My manager explained clearly that the robotization will make tasks easier for me” ( $\alpha = .90$ ; CR= .90; AVE = .70). Four items were also used for the indifferent manager scenario: “My manager ignored and dismissed the hard work that I do”, “My manager clearly prioritized company’s goals over my own well being”, “My manager seemed unconcerned about what I might feel following the announced decision”, and “My

manager lacked empathetic feelings and seemed indifferent towards me” ( $\alpha = .90$ ; CR = .90; AVE .71).

The mean differences of the two scenarios demonstrate that the manipulations were effective: the mean of the perceived perspective taking used by the manager was significantly higher in the perspective taking manager condition than in the indifferent manager scenario ( $M_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}}=5.42$ ,  $SD=0.89$   $t(201) = 13.26$ ,  $p <.001$ ;  $M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ,  $t(201) = 10.90$ ,  $p <.001$ ). Similarly, there was a significant difference in the mean of the perceived indifference expressed by the manager in the indifferent manager condition than in the perspective taking manager condition ( $M_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = 2.25$ ,  $M_{\text{Indifferent}} = 4.59$ ,  $t(201) = 11.50$ ,  $p <.001$ ). Further supporting the effectiveness of the manipulation, participants in the indifferent manager condition perceived that the manager lacked more empathetic feelings than participants in the perspective taking condition ( $M_{\text{PerspectiveTaking}} = 2.72$ ,  $M_{\text{Indifferent}}= 4.82$ ,  $t(201) = 9.39$ ,  $p <.001$ ). Overall, our manipulation was effective.

#### 4.2 Hypothesis Testing

Means and standard deviation per condition, as well as correlation between variables, are shown in Table 1. As expected, the dependent variables are significantly correlated amongst them, as well as anger and fear.

Variables	Mean (SD)					
	Perspective Taking	Indifferent	1	2	3	4
1. Sabotage	1.55 (.98)	1.64 (1.16)	-			
2. Turnover	4.51 (1.77)	5.41 (1.42)	.14*	-		
3. Psychological Safety	4.23 (1.12)	3.58 (1.13)	-.08	-.58**	-	
4. Anger	2.31 (1.04)	2.60 (1.02)	.18**	.54***	-.33***	-
5. Fear	2.74 (1.03)	3.08 (1.03)	.08	.52***	-.27***	-.78***

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations

$p < .05 = *$ ;  $p < .01 = **$ ;  $p < .001 = ***$

We used ANOVA to test Hypothesis 1 that individuals exposed to managers displaying perspective taking will experience lower levels of turnover and sabotage intentions. Results ( $F(1,202) = 15.75$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) revealed that participants in the perspective taking condition reported lower levels of turnover intentions ( $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) than did participants in the indifferent condition ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ). This supports H1a. Contrary to our expectations, however, there were no significant differences in sabotage intentions between the two conditions ( $M_{\text{perspective taking}} = 1.55$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ;  $M_{\text{indifference}} = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ;  $F(1,202) = 0.40$ ,  $\eta^2 = .002$ ,  $p = .529$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1b was not supported.

To test Hypothesis 2a that the effect of manager IER approach on and turnover is sequentially mediated by psychological safety and fear, we entered the manager IER condition as the independent variable, psychological safety and fear as consecutive mediators, and turnover intentions as the dependent variable. We used Model 6 of the macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2022). The indirect effect index was significant for turnover intentions ( $B = -.09$ ,  $\text{BootSE} = .04$ ,  $95\%CI[-.18 \text{ } -.03]$ ), mirroring our findings for the main effect of IER. Thus, Hypothesis 2a was supported.

We used the same procedure to test Hypothesis 2b, which posits that psychological safety and anger mediate the relationship between manager IER and turnover intentions and sabotage. The indirect effect index was significant for both turnover intentions ( $B = -.11$ ,  $\text{BootSE} = .04$ ,  $95\%CI[-.21 \text{ } -.04]$ ) and sabotage intentions ( $B = -.03$ ,  $\text{BootSE} = .02$ ,  $95\%CI[-.08 \text{ } -.004]$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2b was supported.

## 5. Discussion

Models of change communication emphasize the importance of managers' caring and empathetic communication in facilitating employees' acceptance of change (Men *et al.*, 2020). As most research has focused on information sharing about the need for change (Onyeneke and Abe, 2021), the emotional dimension of change communication has been neglected, despite the impact of employee emotions on employee well-being and adaptation to change (Oreg and Michael, 2023). We theorize and provide initial experimental evidence that displays of perspective-taking in interpersonal communications may increase psychological safety, which, in turn, attenuates emotional trajectories associated with passive and active resistance. Importantly, our finding of no direct relationship between IER and sabotage intentions (H1b) deserves attention. This result may be explained by the nature of sabotage as a behavior. Unlike turnover, which is a passive form of withdrawal, sabotage involves deliberate, harmful actions. Because of this, it may therefore require stronger or more prolonged provocation than what a single managerial interaction can generate.

Another possible explanation is that the vignette did not fully capture the organizational conditions under which sabotage is more likely to occur, such as repeated mistreatment or high job insecurity. Rather than indicating a null effect, the absence of a direct path invites a more nuanced reading of our results. Consistent with our theoretical framework, perspective-taking may not directly influence sabotage intentions, but rather do so through the sequential mediating roles of psychological safety and anger. The significant indirect effect (H2b) supports this interpretation, suggesting that these relational and affective pathways carry the influence of perspective-taking on sabotage intentions.

These findings should be interpreted alongside several methodological considerations. First, the vignette methodology, while enabling causal inference, involves a degree of artificiality

that may limit the ecological validity of the results, particularly for sabotage intentions, which likely require more sustained or severe organizational conditions to emerge. This may partly explain the non-significant direct effect on sabotage (H1b), even as the indirect pathway through anger remained significant. Second, the single-exposure design does not capture the cumulative effects of repeated IER displays on employee responses over time. Longitudinal and field-based designs would strengthen the generalizability of these findings. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study advances research on organizational change communication by providing initial experimental evidence that managers' displayed perspective-taking can function as a form of interpersonal emotion regulation that influences employees' emotional responses to technological change. **By increasing psychological safety and attenuating fear and anger, perspective-taking displays may reduce employees' resistance to robotization, highlighting the importance of integrating IER into models of change communication and carrying important implications for organizations undergoing technological change, though replication in more naturalistic settings is needed to establish the robustness of these effects.**

### *5.1. Theoretical Contributions*

Our study contributes to change management communication and interpersonal emotional regulation scholarship. First, it advances the understanding of organizational change management by exploring leaders' use of IER strategies during technological transitions as a communication strategy to stall the harmful manifestations of employee resistance. While organizational change management implicitly recognizes emotions, communication change models have yet to systematically explore how communication can address these emotions in change processes. Harikkala-Laihinen's interpretive study of post-acquisition (2022) provided initial evidence of how managers' communication during the change process can

activate employees' positive emotions towards change. Our study extends this initial exploratory research by providing experimental evidence consistent with the claim that managers' **use or absence** of IER strategies may shape employee emotional reactions, particularly fear and anger, during robotization processes. We thus advance a conceptualization of emotional communication practices as tools for collective emotion management during periods of change.

Relatedly, by integrating IER theory into models of communication of change, we expand the arsenal of programmatic communication strategies (Russ, 2008) that managers may use during organizational change processes. Past studies have focused on information sharing, showing the benefits of justifying the change or providing accurate, useful information to employees (Armenakis *et al.*, 2002; Oreg *et al.*, 2011). In addition, we propose psychological safety as a proximal lever that may be targeted through communication during technological change and suggest that displays of perspective-taking merit consideration in managerial communications around change.

Second, various literatures have stressed the role of managers' empathy or emotional intelligence in facilitating employees' readiness to change (Gooty *et al.*, 2010). We extend this literature by examining displayed perspective-taking, a communicative practice that may or may not align with managers' personal empathy traits. By simply acknowledging employees' negative emotions towards robotization, managers can attenuate them, as this makes employees feel more secure. In the context of high-threat technological changes, such as robotization, perspective-taking functions as an interpersonal "buffer," dampening threat-related emotions.

Extending this focus on emotion-regulative communication, our study further contributes to research on technological change by providing initial evidence that employees' emotional experiences and the psychological safety fostered through managerial communication may play an important role in enabling cognitive and behavioral adaptation to new technologies. Building on the view of emotion as a relational and managerial practice, we respond to recent calls for more holistic approaches to technology (Bailey and Barley, 2020), moving beyond narrow concerns with usability, efficiency, and acceptance. In doing so, we challenge the dominance of cognitive and rationalist perspectives in managing technological change (Clausen *et al.*, 2024), which typically adopt a top-down orientation that positions employees as passive recipients of technology (Besson and Rowe, 2012) and leaves little room for emotional engagement or participation. Our findings suggest that robotization processes and technological change more broadly are not merely a process of information transfer or skill acquisition, but a fundamentally relational process in which leaders' emotion regulation strategies shape employees' interpretation of the change as threatening or manageable.

Third, our study also contributes to the literature on IER by unveiling psychological safety as a crucial psychological mechanism underpinning the effectiveness of these strategies. This complements extant theories that have not yet focused on the mechanisms whereby IER strategies produce effects. By providing initial evidence of psychological safety as a mechanism linking displayed perspective-taking to reduced resistance, we offer a more nuanced account of how leader communication transforms employees' emotional reactions into adaptive responses. These findings extend our understanding of IER in the workplace by illuminating the psychological pathways through which leader communication may shape employees' behavioral responses.

## *5.2 Practical Implications*

This study offers valuable insights into managing and communicating change processes. First, it expands the repertoire of strategies available to leaders driving transformational change by examining the role of displayed perspective-taking in shaping employee resistance behavior. Our findings indicate that managers' communication about robotization should begin by acknowledging and validating employees' likely negative emotions, reducing perceived threat, and establishing psychological safety before delivering readiness content. Once employees feel safe, managers can address the core readiness levers established by Armenakis and Harris (2002)—clarifying why now, why this, we can do it, who backs it, and what's in it for me. Our work suggests this sequence may be more effective when an empathetic communication style strengthens receptivity to the message's content.

By providing experimental evidence that psychological safety mediates resistance, our findings suggest that negative reactions may not be inevitable but are partly shaped by how leaders communicate. This challenges narratives that frame worker resistance to automation as irrational technophobia and implies that interventions focused solely on reskilling programs may be insufficient without attention to the emotional and relational dimensions of technological change.

A second practical recommendation concerns tailoring change communication strategies to the type of resistance encountered. Resistance is not homogeneous but can take both passive and active forms (Cieslak and Valor, 2025; Oreg and Michel, 2023). When employees exhibit passive resistance, characterized by disengagement or quiet withdrawal, organizations may focus on fostering psychological safety, clarifying expectations, and offering gradual

opportunities for involvement. In contrast, active resistance expressed through overt opposition or vocal dissatisfaction may call for participatory decision-making, conflict mediation, and visible leadership support to address underlying concerns (Harikkala-Laihin, 2022).

Our findings also emphasize the importance of leader training in recognizing and managing emotional dynamics (Deshpande and Srivastava, 2022). HRM practitioners should consider developing programs that equip managers with the skills to recognize distinct forms of resistance — whether reflecting withdrawal, fear, or frustration — and respond with flexibility in how they communicate. Rather than generic soft-skills training, such programs should foster openness to employee voice and position IER as a cornerstone of organizational change, supporting the development of a resilient, adaptable workforce.

Beyond organizational boundaries, these findings carry broader societal relevance. Robotization is reshaping labor markets at scale, generating widespread uncertainty among workers across industries and skill levels. Public discourse often frames worker resistance to automation as a productivity problem to be managed rather than a legitimate emotional response to perceived threat. Our findings suggest that *how* technological change is communicated, not only *what* is communicated, shapes whether workers experience it as threatening or navigable. In public sector organizations and industries undergoing mandated automation, the relational dimensions of technological transitions are rarely prioritized in workforce adaptation programs. Policymakers should therefore consider how manager-employee communication is designed and supported, alongside structural and technical measures, when developing workforce adaptation strategies.

### *6.3 Limitations and Future Research*

Several limitations of this study merit acknowledgment. This study is based on self-reported data, which introduces the possibility of common-method bias and social desirability bias. Moreover, resistance was operationalized as behavioral intentions rather than actual behaviors. The correspondence between intended and enacted resistance may be limited, particularly for high-stakes behaviors such as sabotage, which likely require sustained organizational conditions to materialize. Although the experimental design attenuates these risks, incorporating behavioral observations, peer evaluations, or objective performance indicators in future studies would enhance the robustness of findings.

Furthermore, participants' reactions to a vignette-based hypothetical scenario may not capture the full complexity or emotional intensity of real-world robotization processes, in which threat perceptions accumulate over time and are embedded in broader organizational dynamics. While experiments offer high internal validity for causal inference, they necessarily constrain the number of variables measured, and real-world appraisals of managers' IER may be influenced by environmental factors not captured here. Future studies should therefore replicate our findings in more naturalistic settings — such as field studies — while deliberately sampling from populations most directly affected by robotization, including workers in manufacturing, logistics, and other sectors with distinct occupational identities and labor relations.

Beyond methodological constraints, our conceptual model is bounded by two contextual factors. First, we examined robotization as a highly visible, identity-threatening form of technological change. In such high-uncertainty environments, leaders' displays of perspective-taking are particularly consequential because they help employees interpret

managerial intentions and regain a sense of control. Further work should examine whether similar results emerge in more incremental or less threatening forms of organizational change, testing threat visibility and identity threat as boundary conditions of the proposed mechanisms. Second, our U.S. sample limits the generalizability of our findings. In low power distance cultures like the U.S., managerial displays of perspective-taking align with egalitarian leadership expectations; however, in high power distance cultures, such displays could be perceived as inauthentic or inappropriate, potentially exacerbating rather than mitigating negative emotions (Hofstede, 2011; van Kleef *et al.*, 2021). Cross-cultural research examining power distance as a moderator would clarify these boundary conditions.

Finally, future research should examine how individual characteristics — such as personality traits, attachment orientations, and prior experiences with leaders — moderate employees' receptivity to perspective-taking displays. Employees' own IER capacities and perspective-taking abilities may further shape reciprocal dynamics with leaders. Longitudinal and experience-sampling methodologies could capture these evolving relational dynamics, examining how employees' responses influence leaders' continued use of perspective-taking and whether perceived authenticity and consistency over time strengthen or erode trust.

## **6. Conclusion**

By introducing IER as a strategy to curb employee resistance to change, we give a fresh theoretical perspective on the communication of change, highlighting the human side necessary for achieving transformational success. By understanding and helping employees regulate their anger and fear towards disruptive transformations, organizations can nurture psychological safety, thereby creating environments where individuals feel valued and supported. This focus is essential for aligning organizational transformation with the greater

common good, ensuring that change initiatives not only meet productive and efficiency goals but also contribute to societal well-being.

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