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Understanding leader-employee conflict involvement: how leader perceived competence and age shape employee reactions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors that mitigate leader-employee conflict, given that leaders invest substantial time in managing such conflicts. Since employee perceptions of their leader play a key role in how employees treat their leader, in this study it was hypothesized that employees who perceive their leaders as more competent are less likely to engage in conflict with them. Furthermore, drawing on the framework of implicit leadership theories (ILTs), it was predicted that this relationship will be stronger when leaders are older. This is because older competent leaders are more likely to be perceived as embodying prototypical leadership qualities, such as generativity (the motivation to support employees' growth and development), reducing in turn negative employee reactions such as employee conflict involvement with the leader.

Design/methodology/approach – To test these hypotheses, three studies were conducted: Study 1 was a dyadic field study (n = 121 dyads) among employees and their direct supervisors. Study 2 was a time-lagged study among employees (n = 227) and Study 3 was a scenario experiment (n = 372).

Findings – In line with the hypotheses, Study 1 showed that leader age strengthens the negative relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement with the leader. Study 2 and Study 3 showed that the leader's perceived generativity mediates the age-conditional relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement with leaders.

Conflict of interest: Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Compliance with ethical standards: This research involves human participants. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration.

Data availability statement: Processed Data, Mplus Syntaxes and Online Supplemental Materials are available from the Open Science Framework at: https://osf.io/6bzj8/?view_only=32d9ab167f6c4c53bf093797f121d24f; Pre-registration of Study 2 can be found via this link: https://osf.io/vra75; Pre-registration of Study 3 can be found via this link: https://osf.io/k9mfx

Dissemination of the findings: The results of this research have been presented at the Werkgemeenschap Arbeids- & Organisatie Psychologie conference in Tilburg, the Netherlands, in November 2022 and at the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology conference in Katowice, Poland, in May 2023.

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Originality/value – These findings underscore the importance of employee ILTs regarding prototypical leadership characteristics in shaping leader-employee conflict and highlight the moderating role of leader age in this relationship.

Keywords Leader competence, Leader generativity, Workplace aging, Implicit leadership theories, Employee conflict involvement

Paper type Research paper

Leaders spend up to 40% of their time dealing with interpersonal conflicts, including those involving their employees and themselves (Runde and Flanagan, 2012; Spector and Jex, 1998). Indeed, employees often engage in conflict with their leader, which exacts a significant toll on leaders, employees and organizations (Esquivel and Kleiner, 1996; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2013; see also Zhang *et al.*, 2011), underscoring the importance of understanding which factors may prevent it. A main factor that may influence employee conflict involvement with their leader is leader's perceived competence. Indeed, one of the critical characteristics for leadership emergence and attainment (Rubin *et al.*, 2002) is leaders' capability to leverage their cognizance and experience to guide their employees (Bass, 1990; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2007). Accordingly, leaders who are viewed as competent are trusted by their employees more (Mayer *et al.*, 1995) and elicit stronger feelings of psychological safety (Mao *et al.*, 2019). Perceived leader competence can, thus, function as a protective factor against employee conflict involvement with the leader.

Importantly, perceptions of leader competence do not exist in isolation but are shaped by implicit leadership theories (ILTs) – cognitive schemas that individuals use to evaluate leaders (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Junker and van Dick, 2014; Lord *et al.*, 1984). A well-established ILT is that prototypically competent leaders are often implicitly associated with older age (Braun *et al.*, 2018; see also Tavares *et al.*, 2018). Employees tend to attribute experience, wisdom and strategic acumen to older leaders (Spisak *et al.*, 2014), making them more consistent with leadership prototypes (Buengeler *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, the effects of perceiving a leader as highly competent, are likely reinforced when the leader is older, as their age aligns with expectations of what a competent leader should look like. This implicit alignment may further strengthen the relationship between perceived leader competence and reduced conflict initiation by employees. More specifically, we propose that leaders perceived as competent – regardless of their actual competence (Capozza *et al.*, 2017; Chou *et al.*, 2005; Hollander, 1984) – experience lower involvement in conflicts with employees. Moreover, the leader competence – employee conflict involvement linkage is amplified when the leader is older, as age reinforces perceptions of competence in leadership roles.

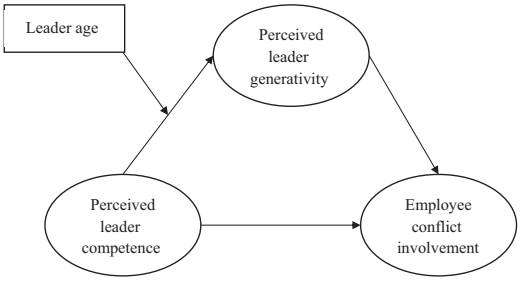
We also propose that perceived leader generativity serves as the key mediating mechanism in this moderated relationship. Leader generativity refers to a leader's concern for guiding, nurturing and contributing to the growth and development of future generations of employees, and it involves behaviors such as mentoring, knowledge sharing and fostering a positive legacy (McAdams and de St. Aubin, 1992; Zacher *et al.*, 2011a). Thus, we propose a conditional indirect effect, whereby perceived competent leaders who are older are more likely to be perceived as generative, which may in turn, foster positive relational bonds with employees and reduce employee conflict involvement. A graphical illustration of the hypothesized research model can be found in Figure 1.

This research makes three key contributions. First, we extend the conflict management literature by examining how leader age moderates the relationship between perceived leader

competence and employee conflict involvement. While previous studies have focused on conflict management strategies used by leaders (Fousiani *et al.*, 2021, 2025b) and employees (Fousiani *et al.*, 2025a, 2022; Green, 2008), little attention has been given to how leaders' perceived attributes – particularly competence – influence employee conflict involvement with leaders. By incorporating the ILT literature (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Junker and van Dick, 2014), we propose that older competent leaders are seen as more aligned with leadership prototypes, eliciting less frequent employee conflict involvement. Second, we contribute to the ILT literature by exploring its application in the context of workplace conflict. While previous research has extensively examined ILTs within organizational settings (Junker and van Dick, 2014), including leadership (Zacher *et al.*, 2011b), to the best of our knowledge, the role of ILTs in conflict dynamics has been underexplored. By integrating the ILT framework with the age and conflict literature, we demonstrate that employees are less likely to initiate conflict with leaders whose perceived competence aligns with age-related leadership expectations. Third, we extend the age and work literature by examining how leader age influences conflict dynamics in the workplace (see also Fousiani *et al.*, 2025b). While much of the existing research has explored the role of employee age in conflict management or the role of age in employee behavior and performance (Chi *et al.*, 2023), our study focuses on how the age of the *leader* shapes employees' perceptions of their leader and how these perceptions, in turn, predict employee conflict behaviors. Our research provides practical insights for organizations navigating intergenerational leadership challenges and developing conflict-preventive strategies in increasingly age-diverse workplaces.

Leadership competence perceptions and leader-employee conflict

Competence in the workplace refers to individuals' capability to perform their job (Phillips, 1984). Besides knowing what to do and being experts in their field (Bandura and Schunk, 1981), competent individuals have broader skills and the necessary wisdom to succeed in the workplace (Chen *et al.*, 2014; Gabarro, 1978). Competence is especially important to leaders' effectiveness (Hollander, 1984), as it is related to the attraction of more employees (Rosenbaum and Tucker, 1962), employee trust in the leader (Mayer *et al.*, 1995), leader likeability (Chen *et al.*, 2014) and perceived support by employees (Price and Garland, 1981). Leader competence also reinforces employees' positive outcomes (i.e. team performance) as it is related to psychological safety among employees (Mao *et al.*, 2019) and job satisfaction (Pudyaningsih *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, previous research connects leader



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. Hypothesized model

competence with higher employee satisfaction, work motivation and organizational commitment (Mikkelson *et al.*, 2015).

While the literature has predominantly focused on the impact of a leader's actual competence on employees' outcomes (Hollander, 1984; Mao *et al.*, 2019; Mayer *et al.*, 1995), focusing on employees' *perception* of their leader's competence offers a unique perspective. Employees often perceive their leader's traits differently from how they actually are (Wubbels, 1993), and it is this perception – rather than the leader's actual competence – that primarily influences their behavior toward the leader (Ferguson and Bargh, 2004). Indeed, leaders who are viewed as competent can foster higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment among their employees (Capozza *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, when employees perceive their leaders as supportive and helpful, they are more likely to thrive at work (Chen *et al.*, 2020). The perception of leaders' competence, however, may not only improve employee attitudes and performance, but also reduce the likelihood of employee negative behaviors toward the leader, such as employee conflict involvement.

Employee conflict involvement refers to situations where employees engage in conflict with others, particularly with their leaders or colleagues, as a result of disagreements or tensions. It typically arises from differences in opinions, values or expectations and may be driven by personal or professional motives (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009; Fousiani *et al.*, 2025a; Spector and Jex, 1998; Zhao *et al.*, 2019). Employee conflict involvement with leaders in particular arises when employees experience dissatisfaction, misunderstandings or a lack of trust and support (Kassing, 2000; Kassing and Armstrong, 2002; Redmond *et al.*, 2016). Other factors that may relate to such conflict are poor communication and unmet needs and expectations (De Dreu, 2010; Green, 2008). In this study, we argue that when employees perceive their leaders as competent, they are less likely to engage in conflict with them as they may trust them more (Mayer *et al.*, 1995) and experience higher support, psychological safety and satisfaction (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Mao *et al.*, 2019; Mikkelson *et al.*, 2015; Pudyaningsih *et al.*, 2020), key components that mitigate many of the common triggers of employee conflict involvement. Based on the above, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H1. Perceived leader competence is negatively related to employee conflict involvement with the leader.

The moderating role of leader age and the mediating role of leader generativity

Perception of leader competence does not happen in social isolation, and its influence on employee reactions and attitudes may depend on other characteristics of the leader. According to ILTs (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Junker and van Dick, 2014) employees hold cognitive prototypes of effective leaders, which shape how they interpret and respond to a leader's behaviors. Chronological age is a salient characteristic that informs these prototypes (Zacher *et al.*, 2015), likely influencing whether a leader's competence aligns with expectations of trustworthiness, psychological support and social investment. Besides being more experienced and knowledgeable, older leaders are likely to be more caring, prioritizing closer relationships and social connectedness (Grossmann *et al.*, 2010; Luong *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, younger leaders tend to be more ambitious, self-oriented and task-focused, emphasizing career advancement and achievement-oriented goals and investing in instrumental work relationships (for reviews see Walter and Scheibe, 2013; Zacher *et al.*, 2015). These tendencies of older leaders align with propositions from socioemotional selectivity theory that as individuals perceive their remaining time as more limited, they focus more on emotionally meaningful than instrumental social goals, relationship-building and mentoring (Carstensen, 2021; Doerwald *et al.*, 2015).

These motivational and behavioral tendencies of older and younger leaders are likely reflected in employee perceptions of their leaders (see Fousiani *et al.*, 2025b; Zacher and Bal, 2012), as people's intentions and motives are readily observable and apparent (cf. Eisenkraft *et al.*, 2017; Szymkow *et al.*, 2013). Employee perceptions of their leader's generativity may influence in turn, how they interpret competence of their leader and, consequently, the likelihood of initiating conflict with them.

Building on the above, we argue that perceived leader competence interacts with leader age in predicting employee conflict involvement. Specifically, we propose that perceiving an older (rather than younger) leader as competent aligns more closely with employees' ILTs regarding prototypical leadership characteristics (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Junker and van Dick, 2014; Zacher *et al.*, 2011b). Employees tend to associate older leaders with wisdom, emotional stability and a greater investment in social relationships, including mentorship and support (Doerwald *et al.*, 2015; Zacher *et al.*, 2011a). This alignment strengthens the perception that older competent leaders are not only effective but also trustworthy, socially invested and responsive to employees' needs – qualities that reduce the likelihood of employee conflict involvement. In contrast, younger competent leaders may not fit as seamlessly into these expectations, as they are often perceived as more self-focused, career-driven and task-oriented (Walter and Scheibe, 2013; Zacher *et al.*, 2015). As a result, their perceived competence may not translate into the same level of conflict mitigation. Consequently, we anticipate that perceived leader competence will be more strongly and negatively related to employee conflict involvement when the leader is older rather than younger.

Furthermore, we propose that perceived leader generativity serves as the key psychological mechanism underlying the interactive effect of perceived leader competence and leader age on employee conflict involvement with the leader. Leader generativity is defined as the drive to support employees' growth and development while striving to leave a lasting positive impact on the organization (Doerwald *et al.*, 2015; Erikson, 1959). This generative motivation extends beyond achieving short-term objectives, fostering a strong sense of responsibility to others and a commitment to cultivating positive relationships with employees (Zacher *et al.*, 2011a, 2011b). Employees are more likely to associate competent older leaders – who align more closely with their ILTs of prototypical leadership characteristics – with generativity, viewing them as more invested in employee well-being and highly dedicated to mentoring and supporting their development. Subsequently, employees are likely to reciprocate the generativity-driven prosocial behaviors of their competent older leaders, responding more positively (Luong *et al.*, 2011), ultimately reducing the likelihood of initiating conflict with them. In contrast, while competent younger leaders may be respected for their skills and ambition, they are less readily perceived as generative due to their stronger focus on career advancement and short-term achievement goals, which align less closely with ILTs of effective leadership. As a result, perceived competence of younger leaders may not elicit the same level of perceived generativity, making conflict initiation more likely. Thus, we argue that perceived leader generativity mediates the relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement with leaders, such that this effect is stronger for older leaders than for younger leaders.

Based on the above, we stated the following hypotheses:

H2. Leader age moderates the effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement with the leader, such that this relationship is stronger when leaders are older.

H3. The moderating effect of leader age on the relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement is mediated by perceived leader generativity, such that the indirect effect is stronger when leaders are older.

The present research

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a multi-source field study (Study 1), a two-week time-lagged survey (Study 2) and a scenario experiment (Study 3). To increase both the internal and external validity of our findings, we used a mixed methods design, which allowed us to reduce bias and increase the certainty of our results (Turner *et al.*, 2017). Although this study focuses on employee conflict involvement with leaders as an outcome variable, it is noteworthy that conflict is a dyadic phenomenon occurring between two (or more) parties and is, therefore a shared experience between all involved individuals (Lewicki *et al.*, 2020). Thus, employee conflict involvement with leaders is likely to be reflected in their behaviors toward leaders and these behaviors may be directly observed by leaders. Accordingly, besides measuring employee conflict involvement with leaders as rated by employees (Studies 2 and 3) we also measured employee conflict involvement with leaders as rated by leaders (Study 1).

We tested *H1* and *H2* in Study 1, a cross-sectional survey of pairs (dyads) of leaders and their subordinate employees. Leaders indicated their age and reported the frequency of their employees' involvement in conflict with them. Employees filled in scales assessing their perception of their leader on the dimension of competence. Study 1 did not measure the mediator (perceived leader generativity) and therefore, it does not allow us to draw conclusions about possible explanatory mechanisms in the hypothesized effects. This decision was driven by methodological considerations, as mediation should not be tested in a cross-sectional design due to concerns about causality and common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Study 2 aimed to address this limitation by testing all hypotheses, including *H3* on the mediating role of perceived leader generativity. In Study 2, we used a time-lagged design with employee participants and assessed the perceived competence of the leader and the chronological age of the leader at Time 1, while we assessed the perceived generativity of the leader and employee conflict involvement with the leader at Time 2. Finally, despite their advantages, Studies 1 and 2 cannot establish causal relationships for the hypothesized effects. We aimed to address this limitation in Study 3, where we manipulated leader competence (high vs low) and leader chronological age (old vs young) while assessing perceived leader generativity and employee conflict involvement with the leader.

Transparency and openness

For all three studies, materials, de-identified data and analytic codes are available at https://osf.io/6bzj8/?view_only=32d9ab167f6c4c53bf093797f121d24f . Hypotheses, study design and analytic plan for Studies 2 and 3 were pre-registered (see the respective method sections for the relevant links).

Study 1

Method

Participants. We assembled a sample of 242 participants, who comprised 121 leader-employee dyads. All participants lived in The Netherlands. Of the leaders (37.20% female; M_{age}= 39.10, SD = 12.70, ranging from 18 to 72 years of age), 31 had previously acquired a university degree, 84 had a college or applied university degree and 6 had a lower education degree. They worked on average 38.5 h/week (SD = 11.20). Of the employees (50.40%

female; M_{age} = 29.10, SD = 10.50 [1], ranging from 17 to 60 years of age), 19 held university degrees, 93 had a college or applied university degree and 7 had a lower degree. Collectively, they worked an average of 26 h/week (SD = 11.70) and had been working at their current company for approximately 5 years (SD = 6.20). According to a sensitivity power analysis, this sample yields 95% power to detect a medium effect size: $r = 0.31$.

Procedure. Participants were recruited from the extended personal networks of a group of eight bachelor- and master-level psychology students. As a means of ensuring anonymity, we distributed envelopes with questionnaires in pairs to employees and their supervisors. The students approached several employees at their workplace and distributed the questionnaires (one for themselves and one for their leader, to be returned in separate envelopes). We requested that employees ask their direct supervisor to complete the accompanying questionnaire. Each leader-employee dyad was given the same code to enable data matching. Participation was voluntary and we did not compensate anyone for their contribution. Participants were actively requested to give their informed consent. Approximately 80% of the approached participants agreed to take part in our study, while about 65% of these participants (dyads) eventually returned the completed questionnaires. Each dyad member took approximately 15 min to complete the questionnaire. Participants filled in the questionnaires in Dutch.

Measures. Perceived Leader Competence. Employees rated their leader's competence by filling out the 7-item competence subscale of Abele and Wojciszke (2007) (e.g. "To what extent does each of the following characteristics describe your supervisor? My supervisor is […] active, capable, skillful"; $\omega = 0.84$; 1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *To a great extent*).

Leader Age. Leaders noted their age in years.

Employee Conflict Involvement with the Leader. Leaders filled in an adapted version of the 4-item interpersonal conflict at work scale (Spector and Jex, 1998), which measures their employees' conflict-related behavior directed at them (e.g. "How often are your subordinates rude to you?"; 1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*). One item was excluded from the analyses because unlike the other three items, it measured leader conflict behavior directed at the employee ("How often do you get into arguments with your subordinates?"). The reliability of the 3-item scale was good: $\omega = 0.83$.

Control Variables. Education is a strong predictor of effective conflict management (Deutsch, 1993). Accordingly, employee educational degree (ranging from 1 = *Lowest possible degree* to 7 = *Highest possible degree/university*) served as a control variable. Moreover, given that employees' work experience influences supervisors' liking of the employee (Murphy and Ensher, 1999), and thus leader-employee interactions (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2017), we also controlled for employees' job tenure (years in the current position) and organizational tenure (years in the organization).

Results

Preliminary analyses. Correlations, means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using MPlus 8 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017) to test if our variables were distinct. The analysis included the leader competence and the employee conflict involvement items. After allowing for correlated errors between two items from the leader competence scale (skillful and competent) in the model [2], we achieved adequate fit ($\chi^2 = 67.24$, $df = 33$, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.09 [90% CI = 0.06; 0.13]; CFI =0.95; TLI =0.93; SRMR = 0.05). We compared this model to another model in which we added all four items from the conflict involvement scale (thus including the item "How often do you get into arguments with your subordinates?") ($\chi^2 = 106.70$, $df = 42$, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.12 [90% CI =0.09;0.14]; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.88; SRMR = 0.08) and

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between study variables (study 1)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Employee conflict involvement (L)	1.67	1.11	–	−0.34***	0.13	−0.12	0.21*	0.11
2 Leader competence (E)	5.79	0.95		–	0.02	0.20*	−0.05	0.01
3 Leader age (L)	39.07	12.70			–	0.04	0.36***	0.39***
4 Education (employee) (E)	4.85	1.50				–	−0.17	−0.23*
5 Job tenure (employee) (E)	9.82	10.11					–	0.72***
6 Organizational tenure in years (employee) (E)	4.99	6.23						–

Note(s): L stands for leader-reported and E for employee-reported; *$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors' own work

the fit significantly decreased ($\Delta\chi^2(4) = 39.46$, $p < 0.001$). Based on these results and theoretical considerations as described above, we excluded that item from further analysis.

Hypothesis testing. To test *H1* and *H2*, we applied structural equation modeling (SEM) using latent variables. The analysis was conducted using MPlus 8 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017). Perceived leader competence was the predictor, leader age was the moderator and employee conflict involvement was the dependent variable. The control variables were entered into the model as manifest variables [3]. As shown in Table 2, the main effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement was negative, while the main effect of leader age was positive. Importantly, the interaction effect between perceived leader competence and leader age showed that the negative effect of leader competence on employee conflict involvement is stronger when the leader is older (estimated slope at 1SD above the mean of age: $b = -0.62$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = 0.001$; 95% CI [−0.93;−0.31]) than younger (estimated slope at 1SD below the mean of age: $b = -0.56$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = 0.002$; 95% CI [−0.85;−0.26]; see Figure 2). These findings support both *H1* and *H2*.

Discussion

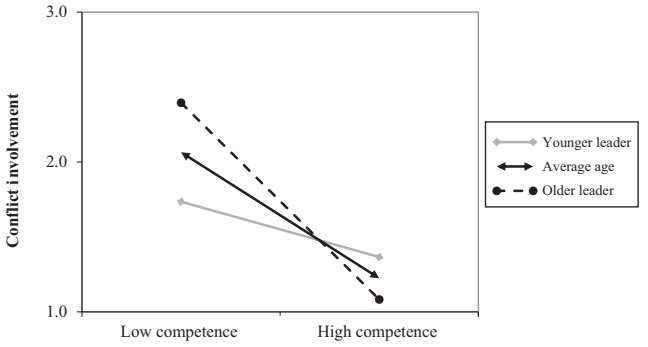
Study 1 examined the relationship between perceived leader competence (as reported by the employee) and employee conflict involvement with the leader (as reported by the leader) as moderated by the leader's age. The results support *H1*, showing that perceived leader competence is negatively related to employee conflict involvement with the leader. Moreover, leader age strengthened the negative relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement. This result supports *H2*, suggesting that a leader's perceived competence indeed reduces employee conflict involvement, especially when the leader is older. This finding can be understood through the lens of ILTs (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005), where employees hold cognitive prototypes of what an effective leader should be like. These prototypes likely align with age-related expectations (Zacher *et al.*, 2011b), influencing how employees perceive and react to leader competence.

Looking at Figure 2, it is important to note that lower perceived leader competence tends to result in more pronounced employee conflict involvement, particularly when the leader is older. This finding is interesting, suggesting that older leaders are penalized more for their perceived incompetence than is the case for younger leaders. This finding aligns

Table 2. Effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement as a function of leader age (Study 1)

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	*p*
Leader competence	−0.56	0.18	−0.89	−0.29	0.001
Leader age	0.02	0.008	0.003	0.03	0.04
Leader competence × leader age	−0.03	0.01	−0.05	−0.01	0.02
Education (employee)	−0.02	0.06	−0.12	0.08	0.74
Job tenure (employee)	−0.02	0.03	−0.06	0.03	0.52
Organizational tenure (employee)	0.03	0.02	−0.01	0.06	0.21

Note(s): Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Perceived leader competence was measured on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *To a great extent*. Leader age was assessed in years. Employee conflict involvement was assessed on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*
Source(s): Authors' own work



Note(s): Low and high competence refers to –1SD and +1SD on competence, respectively. Leader age was measured in years and younger, average and older refer to –1SD (approximately 26.40 years), mean (39.10 years) and +1SD (approximately 51.80 years). Employee conflict involvement was measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *Never,* 7 = *Very often*). The y-axis has been truncated to emphasize the relevant range of values
Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 2. Effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement as a function of leader age (Study 1)

with previous findings that employees generally have higher expectations for older than younger leaders and respond more favorably to them when they exhibit positive behaviors (Zacher *et al.*, 2011b). Conversely, employees tend to respond less negatively to younger leaders who do not behave positively in their view. This heightened inclination of employees to penalize older, less competent leaders with increased conflict may be elucidated by employees' ILTs and the elevated expectations employees place on

prototypical leadership characteristics for older leaders (see also Epitropaki and Martin, 2005).

A key limitation of this study is that when employee tenure and education are excluded from the model, the results become non-significant. This suggests that these control variables may play a crucial role in the hypothesized model, highlighting the importance of accounting for employee demographic factors when examining these relationships.

The cross-sectional design of Study 1 did not allow us to test the mediating role of perceived leader generativity in the observed relationships (*H3*). Study 2 aimed to replicate the results of Study 1 and to further test the mediating role of leader generativity in a time-lagged design. Study 2 also addressed an issue from Study 1: the low mean level of employee conflict involvement with leaders, possibly due to conflict being assessed by leaders rather than employees. Despite conflict being a dyadic phenomenon visible to all involved parties (Lewicki *et al.*, 2020), leaders might have underestimated it (and thus disregarded and under-reported it) because employee disagreements or disobedience naturally challenge their authority (see Almeida *et al.*, 2021). To address this limitation, Study 2 measured employee conflict involvement with leaders as rated by employees.

Study 2

Method

Participants. A total of 324 British employees working at least 20 h per week were recruited (61.10% female; M_{age} = 35.70, SD = 10.70, ranging from 21 to 65 years of age) in the 1st wave of the study via Prolific. Two hundred 27 participants completed the 2nd wave of the study (with a response rate of 71.84%). Of the participants, 73% had previously obtained at least a bachelor's degree, while about 27% had a high school diploma or a lower degree. A sensitivity analysis showed that this sample yields 95% power to detect a medium effect with size: r = 0.23. Study 2 was pre-registered: https://osf.io/vra75 [4].

Procedure. In the first wave, employees provided ratings of perceived leader competence and reported their leader's age. In the second wave, about two weeks later, employees rated their conflict involvement with their leader and their perception of their leader as generative. Participants were actively requested to give their informed consent in both study waves. Each survey took approximately 5–7 min and participants were compensated with £1.20 per finished survey.

Measures. Perceived Leader Competence (T1). Employees rated their leaders' competence using the same 7-item scale as in Study 1 (ω = 0.94).

Leader Age (T1). Employees wrote down their leader's age in years [5].

Perceived Leader Generativity (T2). Employees filled in the 3-item scale from Zacher *et al.* (2011b) referring to their leader (e.g. "I believe that my supervisor uses more time for rearing young employees than for making progress in his/her own career ω = 0.91; 1 = *Does not apply at all*, 7 = *Applies completely*).

Employee Conflict Involvement with the Leader (T2). Employees filled out the same 3-item scale as in Study 1, adapted to the employee perspective (e.g. "How often do you yell at your supervisor at work?"; ω = 0.84; 1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*) [6].

Results

Preliminary analyses. Table 3 presents the correlations, means and standard deviations of the study variables.

We used MPlus 8 (Muthén and Muthén, 2017) to conduct a CFA where we included perceptions of leader competence, leader generativity, as well as employee conflict involvement in the same model. After including correlated errors for two rather similar items

from the leader competence scale (energetic and active) in the model, we achieved adequate fit (χ^2 = 103.96, *df* = 60, $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.06 [90% CI = 04;0.08]; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.04).

Hypothesis testing. We applied SEM using latent variables in Mplus 8. Failing to support *H1*, the main effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement was non-significant (Table 4). However, the main effect of perceived leader competence on perceived generativity was significant and positive, while the main effect of perceived generativity on conflict involvement was significant and negative. Accordingly, the indirect effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict through perceived generativity was negative, $b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.01$; 95% CI [−0.22; −0.07], suggesting mediation.

Importantly, the leader competence × leader age effect on perceived generativity was positive, showing that the positive relationship between leader competence and generativity perceptions is stronger when the leader is older rather than younger (Figure 3). Supporting *H2* and *H3*, the indirect effect of perceived leader competence (through perceived generativity) on employee conflict involvement was stronger when the leader was older rather than younger (see Table 4 for the relevant statistics) (Moderated mediation index = −0.07, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.07$).

Discussion

Study 2 used a time-lagged design to replicate the findings of Study 1 and further examine the underlying perceptual mechanisms that drive the observed relationships. By assessing employee conflict involvement with leaders through employee (rather than leader) ratings, we obtained higher mean ratings of conflict than in Study 1, which confirms that leader-employee conflicts are more prevalent in employees' eyes. Although the direct simple effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement was non-significant, perceived leader competence influenced employee conflict involvement through perceived leader generativity, thus providing support for *H1*. Importantly, supporting *H2* and *H3*, leader age moderated the effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement through perceived leader generativity.

A limitation of this study, when compared to Study 1, is that when employee education and tenure – both accounted for in Study 1 – were included in the model, most of the hypothesized effects, including the interaction effect, lost significance. Unlike Study 1, the results of Study 2 suggest that including demographic factors, such as employee tenure, as control variables when studying leadership and employee conflict behavior may not be necessary. The discrepancies between the two studies may be attributed to the different methodologies used (Antonakis *et al.*, 2010; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). More specifically, Study 1's dyadic cross-sectional design versus Study 2's time-lagged design with employees only – may have introduced variations in how relationships manifest over time. Study 1 may have captured leader-employee interactions more directly, potentially enhancing the reliability of observed effects. In contrast, the time separation introduced in Study 2 may have influenced certain associations due to external influences or changes in employee perceptions over time. These results highlight the need for further research to examine the robustness of these findings across different research designs.

Another limitation of Study 2 is that it uses a 2-wave design to test the hypothesized mediation model and therefore, causality cannot be established with certainty. Since neither Study 1 nor Study 2 examined the causality of the hypothesized relationships, Study 3 was designed to replicate the findings in an experimental setting, which is better suited for testing causal relationships.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between study variables (Study 2)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Employee conflict involvement (T2)	3.68	1.39	–	−0.23***	0.09	−0.32***
2. Leader competence (T1)	5.40	1.19		–	0.08	0.47***
3. Leader age (T1)	43.41	9.84			–	−0.07
4. Leader generativity (T2)	3.76	1.49				–

Note(s): T1 stands for Time 1 and T2 stands for Time 2; ***$p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 4. Mediating effect of perceived leader generativity in the relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement as a function of leader age (Study 2)

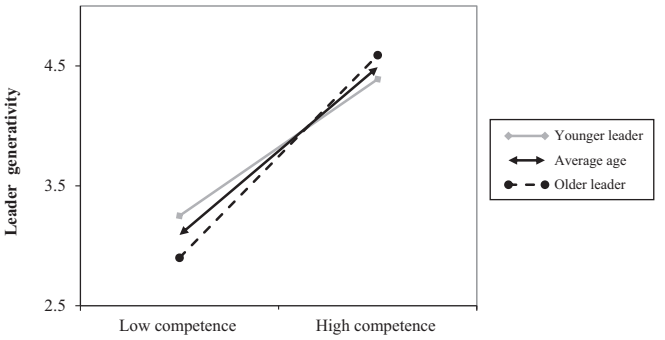
				95% CI	
Predictor	B	SE	*p*	LL	UL
Dependent variable: Leader generativity (T2)					
Leader competence (T1)	0.59	0.13	<0.001	0.34	0.85
Leader age (T1)	0.53	0.33	0.11	−0.12	1.10
Leader competence × leader age	0.26	0.12	0.03	0.05	0.44
Simple slopes					
	Leader age	*B*	Boot*SE*	Boot 95% *CI*	
	Young	0.34	0.14	0.07	0.60
	Average	0.59	0.14	0.32	0.86
	Old	0.84	0.22	0.41	1.27
Dependent variable: Employee conflict involvement (T2)					
Leader generativity (T2)	−0.25	0.08	0.001	−0.37	−0.12
Leader competence (T1)	−0.13	0.09	0.13	−0.29	−0.004
Conditional indirect effects					
Mediator	Leader age	*B*	Boot*SE*	Boot 95% *CI*	
Leader generativity (T2)	Young	−0.08	0.04	−0.16	−0.01
	Average	−0.15	0.06	−0.24	−0.05
	Old	−0.21	0.08	−0.35	−0.07
Conditional total effects					
	Young	−0.22	0.09	−0.38	−0.09
	Average	−0.28	0.08	−0.44	−0.16
	Old	−0.35	0.10	−0.52	−0.20

Note(s): T1 stands for Time 1 and T2 stands for Time 2. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Perceived leader competence was measured on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *To a great extent*. Leader age was assessed in years; young, average, and old refer to −1SD, mean, and +1SD of age. Employee conflict involvement was assessed on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*. Leader generativity was assessed on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Does not apply at all*, *7 = Applies completely*
Source(s): Authors' own work

Study 3

Method

Participants. A total of 372 full-time employees living in the UK partook in this experiment (55.10% female; M_{age} = 37.40, SD = 10.10). Participants were recruited via Prolific. The



Note(s): Low and high competence refers to –1SD and +1SD on competence, respectively. Leader age was measured in years and younger, average and older refer to –1SD (approximately 25.00 years), mean (35.70 years) and +1SD (approximately 46.40 years). Leader generativity was measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *Does not apply at all,* 7 = *Applies completely*). The y-axis has been truncated to emphasize the relevant range of values
Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 3. Effect of perceived leader competence on perceived leader generativity as a function of leader age (Study 2)

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between measured study variables (Study 3)

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Employee conflict involvement	2.82	1.37	–	−0.42***	0.03	−0.06
2. Leader generativity	3.79	1.58		–	−0.02	−0.01
3. Education (employee)	3.06	0.76			–	−0.18**
4. Job tenure (employee)	6.32	6.42				–

Note(s): $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors' own work

majority of the participants (79.3%) had previously acquired a university/college degree while the rest had a high school diploma or a lower degree. An *a priori* power analysis revealed that to achieve 80% power in detecting a medium effect size: $f = 0.25$, 400 participants would be required [7]. Study 3 was pre-registered: https://osf.io/k9mfx.

Experimental design and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions based on a 2 (leader's competence: high vs low) × 2 (leader's age: old vs young) between-subjects design. Participants were presented with a vignette describing a leader who was high vs low in competence based on the vignettes of Laustsen and Bor (2017; see online supplemental material for details). Similar to Kaufmann *et al.* (2017), we manipulated the leader age by describing the leader as either 30 years (young) or 65 years (old) in age. To strengthen the age manipulation, participants were presented with a picture of the leader of

the vignette. The selected pictures were determined to be average in attractiveness and likability based on a pre-test with a picture pool (Ebner *et al.*, 2010). To ensure the generalizability of findings, we created a female and male version of the vignettes (randomly displayed), similar to Kaufmann *et al.* (2017). Participation lasted approximately five minutes in return for £0.70.

Measures. Manipulation Checks. Two items served as manipulation checks for age: "Based on the scenario that you read, what is the age of your manager?" (*30* vs *40* vs *65*) and "My manager is relatively …" (*Young vs Old*). We used two additional items as manipulation checks for competence, namely: "Based on the scenario that I read, my manager is a competent manager" (1 = *Not at all true*, 7 = *Absolutely true*) and "My manager is a manager with limited managerial abilities" (1 = *Not at all* true, 7 = *Absolutely* true; $\alpha = 0.74$).

Perceived Generativity. We used the same 3-item scale from Study 2 to assess leaders' perceived generativity (Zacher *et al.*, 2011b; $\omega = 0.94$).

Employee Conflict Involvement with the Leader. The same scale from Studies 1 and 2 was adapted to this experiment (e.g. "How often do you believe that each of the following happen to Mr John Adams at the workplace? …Employees yell at Mr Adams"; $\omega = 0.93$; 1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*).

Control Variables. Participants' education and job tenure (in years) served as control variables.

Results

Manipulation checks. We conducted a univariate Analysis of Variance. The main effect of the competence condition on the competence scale was significant $F(1,368) = 2009.57$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.85$ and showed that participants perceived the leader as more competent in the high-competence condition ($M = 6.48$, SD = 0.83) than the low-competence condition ($M = 2.15$, SD = 1.02). Neither the main effect of leader age, $F(1,368) = 0.49$, $p = 0.49$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$, nor the competence x age interaction effect, $F(1,368) = 1.97$, $p = 0.16$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.005$, came out significant.

Regarding age, all participants answered both manipulation check items correctly; therefore, no participants were excluded based on the age manipulation. We conclude that our manipulations worked as intended.

Preliminary analyses. Table 5 presents the correlations, means and standard deviations of all variables.

We conducted a CFA where we included perceptions of leader generativity and employee conflict involvement in the same model. The model had a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 22.21$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.01$; RMSEA = 0.07 [CI 0.04;0.10]; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; SRMR = 0.03).

Hypothesis testing. Similar to Study 2, we applied SEM in MPlus 8 with latent variables. Leader competence (1 = *low*, 2 = *high*) was the predictor, leader age (1 = *low*, 2 = *high*) was the moderator, perceived leader generativity (as a latent factor) was the mediator and employee conflict involvement (also as a latent factor) was the dependent variable. Education and job tenure were added as control variables [8].

As shown in Table 6, the main effect of leader competence on employee conflict involvement was negative, supporting *H1*. As expected, leader competence had a positive effect on perceived leader generativity. Moreover, the main effect of perceived leader generativity on employee conflict involvement was negative. The indirect effect was significant ($b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.009$; 95% CI [−0.41; −0.10]), suggesting mediation.

Importantly, the leader competence × leader age interaction on perceived generativity was positive, showing that the positive relationship between leader competence and generativity perceptions is stronger when the leader is older rather than younger

Table 6. Mediating effect of perceived leader generativity in the relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement as a function of leader age (Study 3)

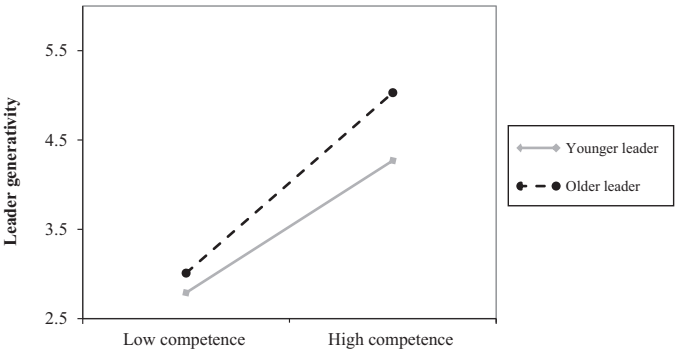
Predictor		B	SE	*p*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Dependent variable: Leader generativity						
Leader competence		0.91	0.44	0.04	0.19	1.64
Leader age		−0.40	0.44	0.36	−1.11	0.32
Leader competence × leader age		0.59	0.28	0.04	0.13	1.04
Education		−0.04	0.09	−0.38	−0.19	0.12
Job tenure (in years)		0.001	0.01	0.96	−0.02	0.02
Simple slopes						
	Leader age	*B*	Boot*SE*		Boot 95% *CI*	
	Young	0.21	0.70		−1.17	1.59
	Old	1.27	0.22		0.85	1.70
Dependent variable: Employee conflict involvement						
Leader generativity		−0.14	0.05	0.004	−0.22	−0.06
Leader competence		−1.29	0.15	<0.001	−1.53	−1.05
Education		−0.01	0.08	0.88	−0.14	0.12
Job tenure (in years)		−0.02	0.01	0.04	−0.03	−0.004
Conditional indirect effects						
Mediator	Leader age	*B*	Boot*SE*		Boot 95% *CI*	
Leader generativity	Young	−0.20	0.08		−0.33	−0.08
	Old	−0.29	0.10		−0.45	−0.12
Conditional total effects						
	Young	−1.50	0.13		−1.70	−1.29
	Old	−1.58	0.13		−1.78	−1.37

Note(s): Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Leader competence was coded: 1= *Low*, 2 = *High*. Leader age was coded: 1 = *Low*, 2 = *High*. Employee conflict involvement was assessed on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*. Leader generativity was assessed on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Does not apply at all*, *7 = Applies completely*
Source(s): Authors' own work

(Figure 4). Relatedly, the indirect effect of leader competence on employee conflict involvement was significant and stronger when the leader was older rather than younger. The total effect was also stronger when the leader was older (see Table 6) (Moderated mediation index = −0.08, *SE* = 0.05, *p* = 0.09). These results provide support for *H2* and *H3* suggesting that leader age moderates the mediated effect of perceived generativity in the relationship between leader competence and employee conflict involvement with the leader.

Discussion

In line with our earlier results, Study 3 showed that perceived leader competence is negatively related to employee conflict involvement, supporting *H1*. Most importantly, and in line with *H2* and *H3*, leader age moderated this effect while perceived leader generativity mediated the conditional relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement. As mentioned in the Discussion section of Study 1, a major limitation of this study is that results become non-significant when employee tenure and education are



Note(s): Leader generativity was assessed on a 7-point scale: 1 = *Does not apply at all*, 7 = *Applies completely.* The y-axis has been truncated to emphasize the relevant range of values
Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 4. Effect of perceived leader competence on perceived leader generativity as a function of leader age (Study 3)

not included as control variables, which may suggest that these factors play a critical role in explaining the observed effects. We discuss these results in the General Discussion.

General discussion

Across three studies, we sought to understand the antecedents of employee conflict involvement with leaders. Specifically, we investigated whether the effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement with the leader varies depending on whether the leader is older or younger, uncovering key age-contingent patterns in leader-employee conflict. Study 1 showed that leaders perceived as competent elicit lower conflict involvement, especially when leaders are older (compared to younger). Additionally, in two studies (Study 2 and 3), perceived leader competence was negatively related to employee conflict involvement when leaders were older (compared to younger) through perceived leader generativity.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our findings have three theoretical implications. First, this research expands the conflict management literature by investigating how leader age influences the relationship between perceived leader competence and employee conflict involvement. Previous studies have primarily focused on the conflict management strategies that leaders (Fousiani *et al.*, 2021, 2025b) and employees (Fousiani *et al.*, 2025a, 2022; Green, 2008) use in response to workplace disputes. However, relatively little attention has been given to how employees' perceptions of their leaders, particularly their perceived competence, shape the likelihood of conflict involvement. By integrating the ILT framework (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Junker and van Dick, 2014), we showed that older leaders who are perceived as competent are more likely to be seen as aligning with prototypical leadership expectations and, as a result, are viewed as more generative. This perception, in turn, reduces the frequency of conflict involvement with employees. This perspective adds a new dimension to the

understanding of leader-employee conflict dynamics by highlighting the relationship between leader perceptions and employee conflict involvement.

Second, we make a significant contribution to the ILT literature (Epitropaki and Martin, 2004; Junker and van Dick, 2014) by applying it within the specific context of workplace conflict. While the ILT framework has been widely applied in organizational settings to explore various aspects of leadership, including leader attributes and their effects on employee behavior (Junker and van Dick, 2014; Zacher *et al.*, 2015), its role in shaping conflict dynamics remains largely underexplored (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). By integrating the ILT framework with existing literature on conflict and aging, we demonstrate that employees are less likely to engage in conflict with leaders whose perceived competence matches the age-related expectations for effective leadership.

Finally, we extend the age and work literature by highlighting the role of leader age in conflict dynamics (Fousiani *et al.*, 2025b; Rosing and Jungmann, 2019; Tomova Shakur *et al.*, 2024; Walter and Scheibe, 2013; Zacher *et al.*, 2015). While prior studies have primarily focused on the role of employee age on conflict management (Beitler *et al.*, 2018; Davis *et al.*, 2009; Yeung *et al.*, 2015) or the role of age in employee behavior and performance (Chi *et al.*, 2023), our study shifts the focus to how *leader age* influences employees' perceptions of their leaders: Employees more readily associate perceptions of competence with generativity for older leaders than younger leaders. Moreover, leader age not only influences how leader competence is perceived but also shapes the broader dynamics of leadership, including how employees engage with leaders in conflict situations.

Apart from their theoretical contributions, our findings have relevant implications for organizational practice. Workplace conflicts have substantial detrimental effects on employee well-being and organizational effectiveness (Esquivel and Kleiner, 1996; Sonnentag *et al.*, 2013), especially when conflicts emerge between interaction partners with power differentials (as in leader-employee constellations). Based on our findings, leaders can actively contribute to conflict avoidance by attending to, and positively shaping, their employees' perceptions of themselves. More specifically, projecting competence and professionalism may help leaders reduce employee-initiated conflict, especially as leaders grow older. However, it is noteworthy that when older leaders fail to project such competence, they face the risk of eliciting more employee-initiated conflict than their younger counterparts (see Study 1). Accordingly, it is advisable to recognize the advantages but also the downsides of appointing older employees for leadership positions in conflict-ridden contexts. While historically, older employees were commonly found in leadership and supervisory roles (Linton, 1936), the landscape has evolved significantly in recent decades (Cappelli and Novelli, 2010). Companies, driven by instrumental objectives such as enhancing performance, have progressively transitioned from seniority-based promotion systems to merit-based systems, which actively encourage ambitious younger employees to engage in competitive career advancement, potentially surpassing their older colleagues on the corporate hierarchy (Chiang and Birtch, 2007). However, this transition comes with various disadvantages (Kunze and Menges, 2017) and organizations should be aware of the risks that they involve (such as employee conflict initiation). For instance, while our results indicate that older competent leaders may benefit from stronger alignment with leadership prototypes, younger leaders may face potential biases, even when they demonstrate competence. Organizations should be aware of these biases and implement strategies that help younger leaders establish credibility and reduce the likelihood of conflict with employees. For example, mentorship programs, targeted leadership training and opportunities for younger leaders to demonstrate expertise and leadership skills may help mitigate potential bias. Additionally, organizations should encourage workplace cultures that

recognize leadership effectiveness beyond age-related expectations, ensuring that competence and leadership potential are evaluated equitably across different age groups.

Limitations and future directions

Our three studies complement each other in their strengths and weaknesses. Study 1 was cross-sectional and thus precluded any causal inferences. Additionally, our convenience sample may not have been fully representative. Since the dyads were recruited through the subordinate employee (i.e. follower), selection effects may have occurred (e.g. employees invited their leaders mostly when there was an established positive relationship). Yet, a strength of Study 1 was the use of multi-source data, combining employee reports on leaders' competence with leader reports on conflict involvement. This aspect helps to rule out positive self-bias in employees' conflict ratings.

Study 2 was limited to employee reports. Although the employee perspective is particularly relevant to our research given the focus on ILTs, we cannot rule out single-source biases. For example, participants with a positive outlook on life may rate both their leaders' qualities and their own conflict involvement more positively than is warranted. This is less of a concern for moderation effects; thus, it does not necessarily threaten the validity of the age-conditional effects that we identified. Another limitation is that the employees estimated their leader's age. Nevertheless, prior research has demonstrated that people are generally quite accurate in estimating other people's age, erring on average no more than about 5 years for unfamiliar faces (Ebner *et al.*, 2010). In a prior study from our laboratory in which both leaders and employees reported the leader's age, the two age reports corresponded to a very high degree (r = 0.90). A strength of Study 2 was the separation of measures across two measurement points. This helped to reduce response biases, such as those stemming from current mood (Heide and Grøhaug, 1991; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Nevertheless, a three-wave repeated-measures design would be desirable for future research to achieve a more robust examination of the three-variable causal chain from perceived leader competence to perceived generativity and conflict involvement (see Cole and Maxwell, 2003).

Study 3 was limited in its use of hypothetical vignettes. Participants had to rate a hypothetical leader's qualities and behavior toward employees – a paradigm that, despite appearing often in the organizational literature, is characterized by low realism (Randall and Gibson, 1990; Wason *et al.*, 2002). For a more realistic set-up, laboratory experiments with confederates taking the role of the leader and participants taking the role of employees should be conducted. A strength of Study 3 is the experimental design with manipulations for both leader competence and leader age, which allows causal inferences on age-conditional effects of competence on leaders' expected conflict involvement. Note, however, that we did not manipulate the mediator perceived leader generativity, and thus we cannot draw causal inferences on the mediating role of this variable.

The analyses conducted across Studies 1 and 3 included control variables that were considered both theoretically and methodologically relevant. However, it is worth noting that many of the anticipated effects were no longer significant when these control variables were omitted from the analyses (Study 1 and Study 3). This underscores the importance of carefully considering and accounting for such variables in future research, as they may significantly influence the outcomes and interpretations of studies in this field (Mändli and Rönkkö, 2025). Moreover, while in this research we conceptualized the association between perceived leader competence and perceived generativity as directional (from competence to generativity), one could argue that this relationship is influenced by a third variable, namely the prototype of a good leader. Future research could more explicitly model the presence of such a latent common factor to better capture its role in shaping leader perceptions.

It is noteworthy that according to our findings (Study 1), perceived competence of younger leaders may not benefit them to the same extent as their older counterparts, which could contribute to higher levels of employee conflict involvement. This raises important questions about whether younger leaders experience a form of backlash due to incongruence with leadership prototypes (Zacher *et al.*, 2011b), or whether employees hold different expectations for how competence should manifest across age groups. Future studies could investigate the role of ILTs, stereotypes and employee expectations in shaping these dynamics more directly.

Finally, an additional limitation of our study concerns the conceptualization and measurement of conflict involvement. While we employed the well-established scale by (Spector and Jex, 1998), which captures employees' engagement in workplace conflicts, our operationalization does not differentiate between distinct types of conflict, such as task conflict, relationship conflict or process conflict (Bruk-Lee *et al.*, 2013; Jehn, 2014). Additionally, some of the items we used resemble those found in measures of workplace harassment (Cortina and Magley, 2003) or bullying (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009), raising the possibility that our measure may have captured more extreme conflict behaviors rather than more routine or subtle forms of workplace conflict. Given that active harassment of supervisors is relatively infrequent, especially due to status differentials in hierarchical relationships (Grandey *et al.*, 2010), future research should consider employing conflict-specific measures that distinguish between various types of conflict. This would allow for a more precise examination of how leader characteristics influence different manifestations of conflict involvement.

Conclusion

Competent leaders are more likely to be seen as generative by their employees when they are older rather than younger, which may help explain why older leaders elicit less conflict from their employees. These findings provide new insights on the crucial role of employee perceptions in leader-employee relations and add to a growing body of literature documenting the emotional benefits of age in the workplace in particular contexts, such as leader-employee interactions. Through ILTs, older leaders who are perceived to be equipped with certain positive qualities (competence) are also ascribed other positive qualities (i.e. generativity), which trickles down to employees' conflict behavior. These insights enhance our understanding of both the antecedents of leader-employee conflict in organizations and the role of age in leadership.

Notes

1. As expected, the mean age of leaders was higher than the mean age of employees and 27.5% of the leaders were aged 50+. These scores indicate the representation of older leaders in the sample, thereby emphasizing the relevance of leader's age.
2. According to Bollen and Lennox (1991) "correlated errors are possible among items using similar wordings." Accordingly, allowing for correlated errors between "skillful" and "competent" items was deemed appropriate. We used a similar approach in Study 2 as well.
3. When these control variables are excluded from the model, the results become non-significant.
4. In our preregistration, we originally hypothesized a conditional indirect effect of perceived leader competence on employee conflict involvement with the leader, mediated by perceived leader warmth. Perceived leader generativity was initially included as a proxy for warmth. While our findings confirmed the expected indirect effect of perceived warmth, this paper focuses on perceived leader generativity as the mediating mechanism because it provides a more theoretically robust and contextually relevant explanation in the leadership domain.

5. People are generally accurate in judging other people's age. Even when estimating the age of strangers, people err on average no more than about 5 years (Ebner *et al.*, 2010).
6. In this study we also tested the hypothesized relationships with employee education and tenure as control variables, similar to Study 1. However, when these control variables were added to the model, most of the hypothesized effects, including the interaction effect, lost significance.
7. We originally aimed for 400 participants. However, after entering certain inclusion/exclusion criteria in Prolific (e.g. full-time employees having a direct supervisor, occupying non-supervisory positions, no participation in previous studies of the researchers), only 377 participants were eligible for this study. The final sample size is not far from the initial target and given that the recruited participants met all our inclusion and exclusion criteria, we deem this sample size sufficient.
8. Similar to Study 1, when these control variables are excluded from the model, the results become non-significant.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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