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Setting the Stage: Line Managers' HR Orientation as an Antecedent to Perceived HR Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

The field of strategic human resource (HR) management has shown an increasing focus on how employees perceive and react to their organization's HR practices. In this perspective, employees are not passive recipients of HR policies or mere observers of their managers' HR implementation strategies. Rather, their perceptions play a critical role in shaping organizational culture and fostering high-performing workplaces. However, important questions remain regarding how line management roles shape not only employees' assessments of their work environment but also their perceptions of HR effectiveness. Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory, we argue that line managers' compliance- versus commitment-focused orientations influence employee appraisals of threats and challenges in their jobs. These appraisals, in turn, shape how employees evaluate the effectiveness of their organization's HR practices (i.e., perceived HR effectiveness). Using qualitative data from focus groups and a multilevel quantitative research design, we find evidence supporting our hypotheses, showing that line managers' HR orientations significantly influence employees' cognitive appraisals and subsequent perceptions of HR effectiveness. We conclude by discussing the theoretical contributions and offering practical recommendations for improving the implementation of HR practices.

1 | Introduction

Research in strategic human resource (HR) management has shifted toward exploring employees' perceptions of organizational HR practices, rather than relying solely on managerial accounts (Alfes et al., 2012; Jiang et al. 2017; Piening et al. 2014; Van De Voorde and Beijer 2015). This approach builds on the idea that employees are not passive recipients of HR policies or silent bystanders who simply observe the implementation of people management activities; instead, they actively interpret and make sense of these policies based on their own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Nishii et al. 2008). According to the literature, assessing these perceptions is critical for improving employee well-being and developing high-performing workplaces (Van De Voorde et al. 2012). These principles have inspired a surge of research on employees' critical role in ensuring that HR practices are implemented in line with organizational strategic objectives (Alfes et al. 2012; Kilroy et al. 2017; Jiang et al. 2017; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith 2019; Ogbonnaya et al. 2017; Van De Voorde and Beijer 2015).

Despite notable progress, unresolved issues remain in understanding how employees perceive the effectiveness of their organization's HR practices (Beijer et al. 2021; Van Beurden et al. 2021; Van De Voorde and Beijer 2015). Prior research on employee HR perceptions has emphasized the outcomes of these perceptions, with fewer studies exploring their antecedents (e.g., Arthur et al. 2016; Kuvaas et al. 2014). The focus on outcomes has its benefits, such as ensuring better alignment between HR implementation and organizational goals and helping
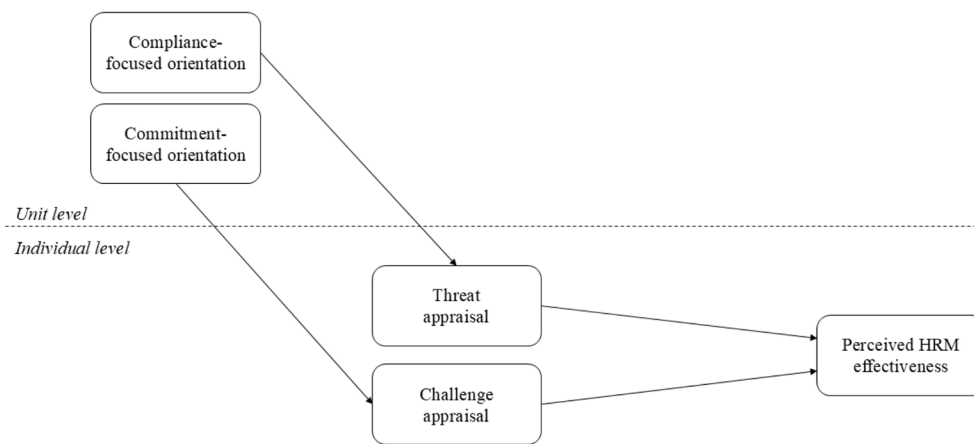
FIGURE 1 | Conceptual model.

organizations identify and address discrepancies between intended and actual HR practices. However, this emphasis may overlook critical insights into the factors that influence how employees perceive the effective implementation of HR practices. Understanding the antecedents of these perceptions is therefore crucial not only for designing effective HR policies but also for explaining why some HR practices are experienced more positively or negatively after implementation (Van Beurden et al. 2021). We argue that one critical element missing from this discussion is the role of line managers, specifically their attitude toward carrying out people management responsibilities. We assert that line managers' HR orientation (i.e., the intentions they hold toward managing HRs and the approach they take in implementing HR practices) significantly shapes employees' perceptions of HR effectiveness.

Traditionally, scholars have viewed line managers as playing either a passive or linear role in HR implementation, adhering strictly to organizational guidelines and directives (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Trullen et al. 2020; Van Mierlo et al. 2018). This linear approach minimizes variability in compliance by reducing any inconsistencies between intended, actual, and perceived HR practices (Nishii et al. 2008; Makhecha et al. 2018). For example, a line manager who enforces company policies helps align the organization's strategic goals (intended HR practices) and the operational-level practices experienced by employees (actual and perceived HR practices) (Townsend et al. 2022). In this capacity, managers act as executors of top-level HR strategies, prioritizing uniformity and compliance to limit misinterpretations and variability. Yet, more recently, evidence suggests that line managers take a more active role in HR implementation as organizations shift toward decentralized HR models (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Kehoe and Han 2020). Rather than strictly following directives, managers often interpret and adapt intended HR practices based on their subjective judgment, leading to variability in how policies are implemented and enforced within teams. For example, performance appraisals, training, and career management—critical HR functions—are frequently handled by line managers, making them central to shaping employees' perceptions of HR effectiveness (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). Despite this, strategic HRM research has not fully examined how line managers' interpretations of their roles shape employee perceptions of HR effectiveness.

Using a combination of qualitative data from focus groups and a multilevel quantitative research approach, we explore how employees perceive the effective implementation of their organization's HR practices (viz. *perceived HR effectiveness*). We move beyond simply identifying the antecedents of these perceptions by exploring the crucial role of line managers' HR orientations in shaping how HR effectiveness is perceived from employees' point of view. Specifically, we argue that managers' compliance-versus commitment-focused orientations affect employees' appraisals of threats and challenges in their jobs. These appraisals, in turn, influence employees' perceptions of HR effectiveness. Our theoretical framework is grounded in cognitive appraisal theory, which explains how individuals evaluate and respond to threats and opportunities in their environment (Folkman et al. 1986; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). This framework underscores the role of cognitive processes in shaping how individuals interpret and understand their surroundings (Skinner and Brewer 2002), making it especially relevant for examining employee reactions to working conditions. Building on this framework, we propose that under compliance-oriented managers, employees are more likely to view their workplace as threatening, leading to less favorable perceptions of HR effectiveness. In contrast, employees under commitment-oriented managers may view their work environment as challenging, resulting in more positive HR perceptions.

In developing and testing this theoretical model (as depicted in Figure 1), we make three distinct contributions to strategic HRM literature. First, we know from prior research that well-designed and implemented HR practices can significantly influence employee attitudes and performance (Delmotte et al. 2012). Importantly, how employees perceive and understand their organization's HR practices is critical to their alignment with and support for the organization's strategic objectives. However, researchers have paid limited attention to how employees perceive or subjectively interpret the effectiveness of these HR practices, a factor that fundamentally shapes organizational outcomes (Wang et al. 2020). Although existing work on employee perceptions has focused mostly on the "what, how, and why" of HR practices (Wang et al. 2020), the discourse around the perceived effectiveness of such practices has received little exploration. We build on this work by exploring a different question: what drives employees'

perceptions of HR effectiveness? While it is valuable to understand whether employees perceive their organization as implementing rigorous training programs, robust development initiatives, or performance-driven appraisals, it is equally important to assess whether they view these practices as effective. For instance, an employee may acknowledge the presence of rigorous performance appraisal processes without necessarily believing they are effective. They might view these processes as formalities that lack real value in helping them understand their job responsibilities or progress in their careers. Similarly, an employee may recognize the availability of diverse training options yet perceive them as misaligned with their personal development needs. Exploring employees' perceptions of HR effectiveness gets to the core of strategic HRM (Huselid 1995; Jiang et al. 2012) and addresses a critical, yet often overlooked, aspect of the broader literature.

Second, and related, we propose that the way line managers interpret their own role as agents of the organization affects the way employees perceive the effectiveness of their organization's HR practices. This idea builds on previous evidence that the alignment between intended HR practices and their enactment by line managers is crucial in shaping how these practices are interpreted and understood by employees (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). We focus on line managers within the same organization who are responsible for implementing the same basic set of organizational policies. It is crucial, however, to acknowledge that managers may adopt varied approaches to framing and enforcing these policies within their respective work teams. We argue that such differences in managerial orientation significantly impact how line managers handle employee relations, which equally plays a crucial role in shaping perceived HR effectiveness (Nishii et al. 2008; Trullen et al. 2020). Thus, it is not simply how line managers implement HR practices that has consequences; rather, it is their overarching orientation toward people management—whether through a compliance or commitment approach—that affects employees' perceptions of HR effectiveness. This distinction is crucial for understanding not only employees' workplace experiences, but also their perceptions of HR effectiveness.

Third, we apply cognitive appraisal theory (Skinner and Brewer 2002), a threat-versus-challenge theoretical framework that helps explain why line managers' HR orientation affects how employees perceive the effectiveness of their organization's HR practices. This framework complements existing models of employee outcomes, such as social exchange theory (Jiang and Messersmith 2018), by emphasizing how managers' people-management styles shape employees' generalized perceptions of workplace challenges or threats. In doing so, we deepen understanding of the cognitive mechanisms that drive employees' psychological responses to HR practices and, ultimately, their perceptions of HR effectiveness. We also offer fresh insights into the sense-making process employees undergo as they appraise their work environment and interpret their managers' HR approach. Accordingly, our study extends prior research on perceived HR practices by showing how employees' assessments of their jobs as threatening or challenging influence their perceptions of HR effectiveness. This perspective introduces a novel

and valuable explanatory model to guide future research on employee HR perceptions.

2 | Theoretical Background

The field of strategic HRM highlights the importance of understanding how employees perceive and react to their organization's HR practices (Beijer et al. 2021; Guest 2017; Kilroy et al. 2017; Ogbonnaya and Valizade 2018; Van Beurden et al. 2021). These perceptions, referred to as perceived HR practices, are mental models that employees develop to make sense of their organization's approach to managing people (Ogbonnaya and Messersmith 2019). They are reflected in employees' subjective interpretations and evaluations of various HR initiatives intended to foster a more productive and supportive work environment (Alfes et al. 2012). In other words, employees interpret their work environment and managerial behaviors through personal lenses, assessing whether these interactions foster trust and collaboration or signal control and restriction. Prior research indicates that line managers, through the daily implementation of HR policies, significantly influence employees' behavioral and psychological responses (Nishii et al. 2008). Line managers serve as the primary conduits for communicating the organizational intentions behind HR practices and play a key role in determining how employees perceive and engage with various workplace activities (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007). Yet, the broader implications of their overarching approach to people management responsibilities remain an area of empirical interest.

In the traditional HR paradigm, the prevailing view has been that line managers adopt a linear approach, or play a relatively passive role, when implementing HR practices (Bos-Nehles et al. 2013; Trullen et al. 2020; Van Mierlo et al. 2018). This perspective suggests that managers adhere strictly to the guidelines and regulations established by the organization without deviating from them or exercising discretionary judgment (Townsend et al. 2022). By adopting a passive role, line managers can effectively reduce variability in HR policy implementation and ensure that employees receive consistent treatment across the organization (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018). However, recent evidence indicates that line managers are not passive but are more actively involved in implementing HR practices within their units or departments (Kehoe and Han 2020). They may, for instance, adjust organizational policies on training and skills development to incorporate activities that directly engage employees or tailor these policies to better address the unique needs of their entire team. This active participation allows line managers to better align HR activities with their management philosophies and strategies for boosting employee engagement.

2.1 | Line Managers' HR Orientation: Compliance Versus Commitment Approaches

We leverage the concept of line managers' HR orientation as a key factor in shaping employees' perceptions and evaluations of HR activities within their workplace. A line manager's HR

orientation encompasses their overarching philosophy, attitudes, or approach to managing people, including how they interpret their own responsibilities, set performance expectations, and implement HR practices in their daily interactions with employees (Kuvaas et al. 2014). This orientation reflects the values and thought processes that managers use to oversee employee performance and align team efforts with organizational objectives (Brewster et al. 2015; Kuvaas et al. 2014). In contrast to formal HR practices, which are typically developed centrally and communicated uniformly across the organization, HR orientation is shaped by individual managerial beliefs, values, and interpretations of their supervisory role (Lepak and Snell 2002). As a result, even when formal HR practices remain consistent, employees may experience them differently depending on how those practices are understood and enacted by their line manager.

Earlier studies (e.g., Arthur 1994; Lepak and Snell 2002; Walton 1985) have explored the concept of HR orientations, though primarily at the organizational level. This work describes a control-focused orientation as a method for managing employees to reduce direct labor costs and improve efficiency. This is achieved by enforcing employee compliance with specific rules and procedures and basing rewards on measurable output criteria. In contrast, a commitment-focused orientation aims to shape desired employee behaviors and attitudes by creating psychological links between organizational and employee goals (Arthur 1994). Building on this idea, Wright and Essman (2021) define a commitment-focused strategy in similar terms to Ouchi's (1977) clan control approach, emphasizing the importance of fostering a work environment that prioritizes shared values, beliefs, and traditions within an organization. Wright and Essman (2021) distinguish this from control-based approaches that focus on monitoring employee behavior through close supervision and disciplinary measures. Notably, they demonstrate that compliance- (or control-) and commitment-focused systems are not mutually exclusive; instead, they can be complementary when assessed at the practice level.

While these studies have focused on the organizational level, our focus is on the managerial level of analysis. Specifically, we examine how line managers interpret and enact their people management responsibilities within the boundaries of broader HR systems. Whereas organizational HR strategies reflect the formal design and intent of senior leadership and the HR function, line managers operate with a degree of discretion shaped by their personal values, leadership styles, and contextual judgments (Wright and Nishii 2007). This interpretive flexibility means that even within the same formal HR system, employees may encounter divergent managerial behaviors that reflect differing HR orientations. Accordingly, rather than revisiting system-level typologies, we explore how line managers' orientations generate within-system variation and shape the lived experience of HR practices on the ground.

To do this, we theorize and build on the compliance- and commitment-oriented perspectives primarily referenced in the ethics and organizational control literatures (Paine 1994; Weaver and Trevino 2001). We adapt these perspectives and apply them to the HR implementation context to capture the

common orientations that line managers hold. For instance, Weaver and Treviño (1999) posit that managers' enactment of compliance and ethics practices creates a work environment that either emphasizes a strong culture of strict adherence to rules and regulations (control) or communal values associated with doing right by employees, customers, and other stakeholders (commitment). A more control- or compliance-oriented approach is formulated on a narrow, calculative conception of social exchange (Homans 1961), such that the monitoring and discipline that come with compliance and control engender contractual employee attitudes and behaviors (Weaver and Treviño 1999). That is, taking a more compliance- oriented approach does not equate to the technical accuracy or consistency of the enactment of practices; rather, it is the *way* in which managers enact control through their behaviors that creates the control environment. Conversely, a more values-or commitment-based approach builds a sense of community and role identity for employees to follow rather than emphasizing control and monitoring (Weaver and Treviño 1999). Importantly, Treviño et al. (1999) stress that while the organization has a proclivity toward control or commitment, it is ultimately up to individual managers to create such environments through their own orientations at the team level.

Thus, in a similar vein, we expect line managers to differ regarding their orientation toward either control/compliance or commitment when managing their teams. A compliance-focused orientation is generally associated with a command-and-control approach where the emphasis is on ensuring adherence to established guidelines and standards (Tyler and Blader 2005). Commitment-oriented managers, on the other hand, are more likely to engender a culture of trust and an ethos of collaboration. While many managers are likely to engage in behaviors that exhibit both commitment and control, we expect managers to have a dominant approach that aligns more closely with either control or commitment. We further expect these differing managerial orientations to be associated with employee cognitive appraisals and their perceptions of the HR system.

2.2 | Cognitive Appraisal Theory and Employee Perceptions

Cognitive appraisal theory (Folkman et al. 1986; Lazarus and Folkman 1984) is a nuanced framework for understanding how employees evaluate and interpret potentially stressful situations or encounters in their environment, particularly involving interactions with line managers. While cognitive appraisal theory has traditionally been used to explain affective and behavioral outcomes, such as motivation, stress, and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; LePine et al. 2005), it also helps to explain how individuals cognitively assess the usefulness, relevance, and effectiveness of organizational resources (Biggs et al. 2017; Skinner and Brewer 2002). Central to the theory is the idea that individuals continuously evaluate whether environmental cues support or hinder their personal goals, and how this evaluation shapes both emotional responses and behavioral outcomes. In other words, challenge or threat appraisals act as interpretive filters through which

employees perceive whether the HR orientation of line managers is effective in helping them achieve their goals, manage their job demands, and advance their careers (Van De Voorde and Beijer 2015).

As argued above, employees' perceptions of HR policies are shaped not only by the formal practices themselves but also by how these practices are framed and implemented by line managers (Brewster et al. 2015). The evaluative process employees engage in to perceive these practices is inherently subjective, as employees interpret their work environment and organizational policies through personal lenses (Beijer et al. 2021; Van Beurden et al. 2021). This suggests that employees' reactions to HR practices are influenced by their cognitive assessments of line managers' style or approach to managing people and how these affect the overall atmosphere and dynamics of the work environment. For example, a managerial approach may be perceived as either supportive or restrictive depending on whether or not employees view it as fostering trust and collaboration (Weaver and Trevino 2001).

Therefore, rather than viewing line managers' HR orientation as a static driver of employee behavior, we argue that employees continuously appraise the actions and behaviors of their managers through a frame of commitment or control. This framing shapes the way in which employees perceive HR practices and whether they view their environment as challenging or threatening. The managerial emphasis on compliance or commitment fundamentally shapes the work environment, creating situations that employees interpret either as restrictive or supportive (Tyler and Blader 2005), ultimately influencing how effective they perceive HR practices to be. Hence, cognitive appraisal theory allows us to bridge the gap between managerial orientation and employees' subjective perceptions of HR practice effectiveness as it addresses the cognitive processes involved in perceiving situations as challenging or threatening, with the potential to elicit strong emotional and behavioral responses (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

Stressful encounters in organizational settings can take many forms, stemming from a person's working conditions, workload, interactions with coworkers or supervisors, and organizational resources (Fox et al. 1993; Hassard et al. 2018). The degree to which these factors are perceived as stressful may vary depending on the environmental context, individuals' personal experiences, and their unique coping strategies (Lazarus 1991). Thus, the cognitive appraisal theory framework involves two distinct stages. The first is the primary appraisal stage, where the individual assesses whether their environment is potentially challenging or threatening. This stage helps in explaining the nature of the situation and its significance for the individual's overall well-being and performance. Once the situation is identified as significant, the next stage is the secondary appraisal, where the individual evaluates their ability to cope within their environment. This stage involves assessing the resources available and determining the best coping strategies to mitigate the stressful environment (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

In the primary appraisal stage, individuals assess the significance of a situation through two main types of appraisals: threat and challenge appraisal. Threat appraisal occurs when individuals perceive a situation as harmful or threatening with potential future losses (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Biggs et al. 2017). This type of appraisal focuses on potential negative outcomes, often resulting in feelings of anxiety, fear, and disengagement. When appraising a situation as a threat, individuals tend to concentrate on the risks and, therefore, experience a degree of uncertainty about their coping ability (Lazarus 1991; LePine et al. 2005). This leads to a stress response that drains mental resources and undermines well-being. In contrast, challenge appraisals occur when individuals evaluate an opportunity for growth, learning, and professional development (Lazarus 1991; Skinner and Brewer 2002). This cognitive response fosters adaptive coping mechanisms, leading to positive emotions such as excitement, enthusiasm, and motivation. Appraising an environment as a challenge implies that individuals recognize their available coping resources and feel capable of effectively handling the demands of the situation (Biggs et al. 2017). As a result, they focus more on the potential benefits of the situation and feel confident in their ability to overcome obstacles.

Related to the present study, we argue that line managers' approach to implementing HR practices influences the degree to which employees perceive the work situation as threatening or challenging. A compliance-oriented manager's approach, for instance, may consistently emphasize rule adherence and close monitoring, which employees interpret as a restrictive and potentially threatening environment. Conversely, a commitment-oriented manager fosters a culture of trust and collaboration, which employees appraise as supportive and growth-oriented. These appraisals are shaped by repeated interactions and reinforced through ongoing managerial behavior and actions (Biggs et al. 2017), creating an enduring perception of HR practices and their effectiveness. Thus, we believe cognitive appraisal theory offers a nuanced explanation for understanding employee perceptions by incorporating the psychological processes through which employees evaluate and respond to their managers.

2.3 | Line Managers' HR Orientation and Employee Perceptions

Our hypotheses consider the possibility that employees may interpret their line managers' HR orientation as a signal of challenge or threat within the organizational environment. First, we argue that employees under managers prioritizing a compliance-focused orientation are more likely to perceive organizational efforts as threatening. This stems from managers' focus on enforcing rules and procedures, which may lead employees to feel that their jobs lack autonomy and flexibility. We expect that managers who adopt a compliance-focused lens will tend to emphasize control and monitoring of employee behavior. This approach may instill a threat mentality in employees, as they become concerned that failing or missing performance targets may result in harsh criticism and even punishment from their manager (Weaver and Treviño 1999). Such an environment creates a situation in which employees experience their work roles as rigid and constraining, potentially creating feelings of stress about their inability to exercise autonomy (Weaver and Trevino 2001; Wright and Essman 2021). Consequently, employees may interpret their experiences under a compliance-oriented manager as a sign that their organization expects them

to work harder without offering many gains or demonstrating commitment in return (Kuvaas et al. 2014). This perception of a compliance orientation can heighten the sense of threat in the workplace.

Contrary to a compliance-focused orientation, employees whose line managers prioritize a commitment-focused orientation are more likely to perceive environmental stimuli as challenges and opportunities for growth. A commitment-focused lens emphasizes shared values, human capital development, work involvement, and greater concern for employee well-being (Arthur 1994; Lepak and Snell 2002; Wright and Essman 2021). Managers using this approach are dedicated to fostering an inclusive work culture that encourages open communication, mutual support, and collaboration (Weaver et al. 1999). Treviño et al. (1998) describe this as a values-based climate that increases felt responsibility for others and promotes a strong sense of community. Such an environment fosters a situation in which employees appraise their work roles as meaningful, with adequate support to develop their skills and effectively navigate challenges. As a result, employees may interpret their experiences under a commitment-oriented manager as an indication that their organization values their contribution and is willing to invest in their professional and personal development (Kuvaas et al. 2014; Lepak and Snell 2002). Along these lines, we argue that adopting a compliance-focused orientation increases threat appraisal, whereas a commitment-focused orientation increases the perception of work roles as more engaging and challenging. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1. *Line managers' compliance-focused orientation has a positive influence on the degree to which employees appraise threats in their work.*

Hypothesis 2. *Line managers' commitment-focused orientation has a positive influence on the degree to which employees appraise challenges in their work.*

2.4 | Indirect Links to Perceived HR Effectiveness

Our theorizing has thus far focused on the primary appraisal stage, examining how individuals evaluate managerial actions as contributing to an environment of threat or challenge. Following this primary appraisal, individuals engage in a secondary cognitive process to evaluate the available coping resources and options in their environment. During the secondary appraisal stage, several factors come into play, including a person's personality traits, past experiences, coping skills, social support systems, and organizational resources (Folkman et al. 1986; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). These factors enable individuals to assess the intensity of their environment and their capacity to manage it effectively. HR practices are widely regarded as organizational-level resources that can be leveraged to navigate work demands and opportunities (Jiang et al. 2012; Jiang and Messersmith 2018; Van Beurden et al. 2021). When carefully designed and consistently applied across organizational levels, HR practices offer the tools employees need to enhance their skills and job performance (Bowen and Ostroff 2004). However, we contend that the efficacy of these practices, as perceived by

employees, can vary depending on how they are implemented at the line-management level.

These arguments align with recent advancements in strategic HRM literature concerning employees' perceptions of HR practices (Kilroy et al. 2017; Jiang et al. 2017; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith 2019). As previously noted, employees perceive HR practices differently (Nishii et al. 2008), and similar behaviors can be interpreted in various ways depending on the individual performing them (Kunda and Thagard 1996). For instance, a manager who strictly follows organizational rules and protocols may create the impression that HR practices are implemented mainly for economic reasons (Kuvaas et al. 2014). As a result, employees might view this approach as purely transactional, seeing HR practices as insufficient for providing resources to cope with stress or handle threatening workplace situations. Conversely, if managers highlight workplace support and growth opportunities as part of their people management strategy, employees may perceive HR implementation as a sign of respect and commitment from the organization (Arthur et al. 2016; Van De Voorde and Beijer 2015). Ultimately, we argue that employee interpretations of HR effectiveness will partly be a function of their line managers' people management orientation (Han et al. 2020; Kehoe and Han 2020). We explore these arguments in the following hypotheses.

2.5 | Compliance-Orientation and Perceived HR Effectiveness

Regarding a compliance-focused orientation, we argue that employees are more likely to perceive threats in the workplace, leading to less positive evaluations of the effectiveness of the organization's HR practices. This perception stems from the constant pressure to adhere to rules and regulations, leading employees to view HR practices as tools for extracting more effort from them. Moreover, an organizational focus on compliance can heighten employees' sense of vulnerability, exposing them to feelings of being under perpetual scrutiny and surveillance in the workplace (Hauff et al. 2014; Wright and Essman 2021) and among their peers. According to cognitive appraisal theory, these perceptions can leave employees feeling overwhelmed and unable to meet their job demands. Several factors support this assertion. First, when managerial actions are perceived to be overly restrictive, employees are more likely to feel mentally and emotionally disconnected from their jobs (Demerouti et al. 2001; Van Woerkom et al. 2016). This disengagement can further exacerbate employees' sense of vulnerability, leading to a decline in their overall performance. At the same time, HR policies may be perceived as being unfairly implemented, with employees feeling that the organization does not prioritize their well-being.

Second, employees in a compliance-oriented work setting often experience a reduced sense of flexibility in how they perform their tasks (Arthur et al. 2016; Treviño et al. 1998; Weaver and Treviño 1999). Research indicates that when employees have limited opportunities to directly influence their job roles, they may perceive the workplace as offering fewer resources for job control or decision-making authority (Fox et al. 1993; Jensen et al. 2013). This perceived imbalance between job

responsibilities and the ability to manage tasks effectively can lead to feelings of powerlessness and negative perceptions of HR practices. In such situations, employees might perceive that HR practices are primarily designed to prioritize cost reduction or efficiency and enforce strict adherence to organizational protocols (Nishii et al. 2008). For example, HR policies related to skills development and performance appraisal may be seen as focusing more on organizational performance at the expense of employee well-being. This perception can demotivate employees, potentially causing disengagement and negative assessments of HR effectiveness.

Similarly, when employees experience threat appraisals, they anticipate loss, failure, or social judgments (Lazarus 1991), causing them to perceive their environment and HR policies not as developmental support but as tools of control (Kuvaas et al. 2014; Fox et al. 1993). This is particularly true as employees often worry about how others perceive them, a social concern of judgment that is closely tied to appraisals (Tyler and Blader 2005). In compliance-oriented environments, where managers emphasize adherence to rigid rules, employees will become acutely aware of how their behavior is perceived by others. For instance, participating in coaching or requesting training could be interpreted not as a proactive step but as a signal of deficiency or underperformance, a perception that carries weight in environments marked by close supervision and limited tolerance for error (Tyler and Blader 2005). Thus, such threat appraisals shape employees' meta-perception, or their belief of how they are viewed in the organization by others (Grutterink and Meister 2022). Under threat appraisals shaped by line managers' compliance orientation, such meta-perceptions often become defensive—employees anticipate that using HR systems may increase their visibility in ways that could jeopardize their standing among their peers.

Hence, over time, this threat appraisal reduces trust in the system and shifts attention away from the potential utility of HR practices and toward their perceived social consequences (Grutterink and Meister 2022; Kuvaas et al. 2014). In this way, threat appraisals diminish the perceived effectiveness of HR practices because they are filtered through a defensive cognitive and social lens rooted in control, fear, and vulnerability (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Nishii et al. 2008). As a result, employees will come to view HR practices as ineffective because the compliance orientation discourages safe and trusting engagement with them. Along these lines, we propose a negative indirect relationship between line managers' compliance-focused orientation and perceived HR effectiveness through threat appraisal. As such, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3. *The negative relationship between line managers' compliance-focused orientation and perceived HR effectiveness is mediated by threat appraisal.*

2.6 | Commitment-Orientation and Perceived HR Effectiveness

Compared to a compliance-focused orientation, line managers who prioritize commitment are more likely to foster challenge appraisals and more positive assessments of how effective the

organization's HR practices are for employees. This reinforces employees' perceptions that the organization's HR practices are well executed and essential for their personal and professional development. We argue that managers holding a commitment-oriented focus will typically frame their messaging around organizational practices in a values-driven manner (Tyler and Blader 2005; Weaver et al. 1999; Weaver and Treviño 1999). Their underlying managerial philosophy leans toward providing significant opportunities for employees to grow and develop professionally (Wright and Essman 2021). These principles align with cognitive appraisal theory, particularly the notion that a supportive and growth-oriented work environment encourages employees to appraise work challenges as opportunities rather than threats (Biggs et al. 2017; LePine et al. 2005). Employees typically receive the necessary support to meet job demands and are motivated to employ adaptive coping mechanisms in the face of work-related uncertainty. Consequently, they are more likely to perceive the organization's HR practices more positively, viewing them as valuable resources for enhancing job performance and coping with stress (Nishii et al. 2008).

Furthermore, employees in a commitment-oriented management setting are likely to be more engaged and motivated, which encourages them to focus on the positive aspects of their jobs. Prior research supports this notion, suggesting that work engagement drives individuals to excel in their roles and achieve desired outcomes (Bakker et al. 2008; Saks 2006). Engaged workers are also more inclined to seek improvements in their jobs, thereby fostering a more fulfilling work experience (Ogbonnaya and Babalola 2021). With this positive mindset, they are more likely to view HR initiatives as instrumental for growth, rather than merely as basic organizational requirements. For instance, engaged employees are more receptive to training opportunities and embrace performance management systems as valuable tools for career development. These positive characteristics reflect the qualities identified by LePine et al. (2005) as critical for viewing work experiences as challenges rather than threats. Relying on cognitive appraisal theory, Biggs et al. (2017) highlight that a support-oriented work environment encourages individuals to approach job demands enthusiastically, seeing them as valuable learning opportunities. These mechanisms foster a sense of personal growth and development, which strengthens employees' belief that HR practices are not only well designed, but also effective in enabling them to succeed, perform, and develop.

Importantly, challenge appraisals themselves serve as a key interpretive lens through which employees evaluate HR practice effectiveness. When employees frame their work experiences as challenges, they are more likely to see HR systems as meaningful supports that align with their growth orientation. This cognitive framing enhances employees' perceptions of HR practices as enabling, trustworthy, and future-oriented. In other words, challenge appraisals activate a mindset that makes the developmental purpose of HR systems more salient and credible. Employees who interpret their environment through this lens are thus more inclined to evaluate HR practices as effective, not simply because those practices exist, but because they are experienced as responsive to personal ambitions and day-to-day job demands (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Bakker et al. 2008).

Additionally, commitment-oriented environments also shape employees' social interpretations of HR practices. When employees perceive their work environment as a challenge, it not only signals the presence of opportunity and growth but also shapes how they believe others will evaluate their actions. Rather than worrying about how others may judge their engagement with development programs, employees under commitment-oriented managers are more likely to feel that participating in HR policies signals ambition, engagement, and alignment with organizational values. This sense of social safety fosters positive meta-perceptions; employees believe that others see them as capable, invested, and growth-oriented (Grutterink and Meister 2022). In this way, challenge appraisals do not simply reflect confidence in internal coping resources—they also indicate confidence in the social safety of engaging with HR systems. Thus, challenge appraisals in commitment-oriented environments reflect both instrumental beliefs about development and social beliefs about reputational benefit, jointly reinforcing positive perceptions of HR effectiveness. Therefore, employees will be more inclined to view these practices as effective and credible tools for helping them succeed. Given this understanding, we propose a positive indirect relationship between line managers' commitment-focused orientation and perceived HR effectiveness through challenge appraisal. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4. *The positive relationship between line managers' commitment-focused orientation and perceived HR effectiveness is mediated by challenge appraisal.*

3 | Methods

3.1 | Overview of Research

This study is part of a broader research initiative that explores how people management activities are implemented within organizations, their perceived effectiveness, and their influence on workplace productivity. Data were collected from five participating government departments in Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory. Nigerian public institutions operate within a hierarchical social, cultural, and regulatory framework (Ikyanyon et al. 2020), offering a distinctive context that both enriches and complements the predominantly Western-centric focus of management research (Wickert et al. 2024). The study was conducted in two stages to ensure both depth and relevance. Given the limited empirical grounding of HR orientation constructs in non-Western settings, we began with an exploratory qualitative phase to better understand how these concepts take shape within the institutional realities of the Nigerian public sector. This initial step was not intended to test hypotheses, but to situate our conceptual framework within the local organizational context.

In Stage 1, we conducted a qualitative investigation using focus groups with line managers to examine the contextual nuances of HR implementation. This step was particularly valuable for exploring how line managers interpret the two HR orientations, and whether these interpretations diverge from those commonly found in Western literature. It also helped uncover critical insights into the actual HR practices in place, as well as how line managers perceive and carry out their people management responsibilities. These findings were instrumental in shaping the development of the survey instruments used in the second stage. In Stage 2, we performed a more extensive quantitative analysis, exploring the relationships between line managers' HR orientation, employees' cognitive appraisals, and their perceptions of HR effectiveness. The qualitative findings offered contextual depth that informed how we operationalized key constructs in our survey instruments, ensuring our quantitative measures reflected the lived realities of HR practice in this setting. Ultimately, by taking a comprehensive, two-stage approach, we enhanced the validity of our findings and generated richer insights into line managers' and employees' experiences with HR practices.

3.2 | Preliminary Qualitative Work (Stage 1)

Our qualitative study commenced with a briefing session for line managers from strategic units across five government departments. These units are specialized teams that handle long-term planning, policy development, and decision-making to help achieve strategic goals. Typically, each unit includes 5–15 members who function as a cohesive team, with team leaders or supervisors (viz. line managers) maintaining close engagement through daily briefings, collaborative meetings, and task delegation. Team members are primarily engaged in analytical and administrative duties, following structured workflows to ensure alignment with overarching departmental objectives. The briefing session aimed to familiarize the participating managers with our research procedures and prepare them for the focus group discussions. Specifically, they were informed about the significance of their contributions to the study's success, the research timeline, and the schedule for sharing results with participants. Following the session, 44 line managers confirmed their involvement in our focus groups and received information sheets outlining the research protocol, ethics standards, and confidentiality assurances.

We conducted six focus groups, each consisting of 5–10 participants. Each session was facilitated by two expert moderators employing semi-structured techniques to guide discussions toward identifying and prioritizing key themes. The primary moderator focused on steering the conversation in a non-directive and unbiased manner, using pre-determined questions to ensure discussions remained on track. This approach has been shown to create a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages meaningful and comfortable participant engagement (Bloor et al. 2001; Morgan 1996). The second moderator served as a note-taker, monitored the recording equipment, and observed group dynamics without actively contributing to the dialogue. Given our clearly defined research objectives, we adopted a consensus-building approach to keep discussions aligned with these objectives (Hennink 2014). While consensus-building in group discussions is debatable, it has proven effective in ensuring clear and actionable themes (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). For instance, participants engaged in reflective exercises at the end of each session to collectively identify and agree on the most critical themes. At the same time, divergent viewpoints were carefully documented

and analyzed to ensure a full breadth of perspectives was captured (Krueger and Casey 2015).

Our group discussions were structured around two thematic areas: (i) the nature of HR practices in place, and (ii) line managers' HR orientation. In the first area, participants discussed the organizational policies, procedures, and strategies formally designed to guide people management activities. They addressed questions such as: "What specific HR policies or practices has your organization developed for implementation within your unit?" and "What challenges do you face in translating these practices into actionable processes?" The second area centered on two contrasting managerial orientations: compliance-focused and commitment-focused orientations. The compliance-focused orientation examined how managers ensure adherence to HR policies, with questions such as: "What steps do you take to monitor and enforce compliance with HR requirements within your unit?" In contrast, the commitment-focused orientation explored how managers cultivate a supportive work environment, with questions such as: "How do you motivate employees and facilitate their professional growth when implementing HR practices?" These discussions were guided by prior research (e.g., Arthur et al. 2016; Hauff et al. 2014; Lepak and Snell 2002; Tyler and Blader 2005; Weaver and Treviño 1999) to ensure alignment with established HR frameworks and to generate meaningful insights.

3.3 | Thematic Analysis

We analyzed the data using a thematic analytical procedure to identify patterns and recurring ideas (Braun and Clarke 2006). Our consensus-building approach ensured that the conclusions reached during group discussions enable a consistent identification of relevant themes (Hennink 2014). The analysis process began with the research team thoroughly immersing themselves in the data by (re)reading the transcripts and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the content (Clarke and Braun 2017). Initial codes were then generated by dividing the data into meaningful segments and assigning descriptive labels to capture significant features. These initial codes were systematically reviewed by the research team and refined to identify patterns and relationships across the dataset (Corbin and Strauss 2014). For example, responses to questions about the organization's HR practices revealed consistent patterns in workforce management processes and procedures. Similarly, discussions about line managers' HR orientation showed variations in managerial attitudes and approaches to people management within their teams. Afterwards, the relevant codes were reviewed and clustered into broad themes that accurately represented the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2014).

Our thematic analysis (summarized in Table A1) revealed three key themes related to the organization's HR practices. The first theme emphasized the importance of skill development initiatives in improving employees' abilities to cope effectively with job demands. Participants identified various HR activities, such as professional development training, mentoring programs, and opportunities for continuous learning, as critical to ensuring employee interests align with organizational goals. However, one participant from Group 3 noted the challenges organizations face in this area, stating, "*Developing our people is vital, but it's hard to make this a reality when budgets and resources don't always match the organization's needs.*" The second theme centered on performance management systems, with participants emphasizing the need for clear metrics, regular feedback, appropriate rewards, and recognition to enhance employee motivation. A participant from Group 6 stated, "Performance reviews should guide and inspire improvement, not feel like a bureaucratic exercise. When the process turns into a box-checking routine, people lose sight of the bigger picture and stop thinking creatively." The third theme focused on employee empowerment initiatives, such as participatory decision-making, collaborative teamwork, and encouraging employees to take ownership of their roles. Together, these themes are consistent with the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework, which highlights the dynamic interplay between improving employees' abilities, motivating them, and creating opportunities for meaningful contributions (Jiang et al. 2012; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith 2019).

The discussions about line managers' compliance-focused orientation highlighted five interconnected themes, illustrating how managers view their roles in implementing HR practices within their teams. Three of these themes reflect a managerial focus on ensuring adherence to established rules, addressing poor performance with appropriate actions, and actively monitoring misconduct. A participant from Group 2 encapsulated this perspective, stating, "In our unit, managers feel a strong responsibility to consistently monitor employee performance and promptly address any misconduct with appropriate consequences. This approach ensures accountability and upholds team standards." The other two themes focused on addressing rule violations and ensuring employees closely follow supervisory directives. Participants described the importance of creating a structured environment where compliance is essential for aligning team behaviors with organizational goals. Similarly, the discussions about line managers' commitment-focused orientation converged on five key themes: promoting shared values, fostering professional growth, aligning performance with organizational goals, building trust, and facilitating effective decision-making. Participants highlighted the importance of empowering team members through consistent guidance and support. They also underscored the value of creating an environment where individuals feel motivated to contribute their best work in line with the organization's vision. Summing up this perspective, a participant from Group 5 stated, "*I think our role as managers is to build trust in our teams, guide them in their career paths, and ensure their decisions reflect organizational goals.*"

After analyzing the data, the research team conducted a thorough review of the key findings and themes, connecting them to existing literature and situating our primary conclusions within established theoretical frameworks. Building on these insights, we designed a set of tailored surveys to examine how line managers' HR orientations influence employees' perceptions of the organization's HR practices. The surveys also included questions to explore employees' views on their work environment and relevant demographic information.

3.4 | Procedure and Sample for Quantitative Study (Stage 2)

Our quantitative study was conducted shortly after Stage 1, involving all 44 line managers who participated in the focus groups and approximately 6–15 members from each of their teams. Managers were asked to provide the contact details of their team members, who were then invited to participate in the study. The number of employee participants per team varied depending on factors such as team size, structure, the voluntary nature of participation, and team members' availability during the study period. A multi-source data collection approach was therefore employed to capture insights from both managers and employees. Data were collected using self-completed questionnaires, distributed over a six-week period to minimize the common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Each participant received a sealed envelope containing an informed consent form, an information sheet explaining the study's objectives, and clear instructions for completing the surveys. All questionnaires were provided in English, the official language used by Nigerian professionals.

At Time 1 (T1), line managers evaluated their compliance-focused and commitment-focused HR orientations. They also provided details about organizational size, two aspects of organizational structure (i.e., formalized and specialized), and the organization's HR practices, which were all analyzed as control variables to isolate the effects of the two managerial orientations on employee outcomes. At the same time, employees reported on their threat and challenge assessments of the work environment and provided demographic information. Six weeks later, at Time 2 (T2), employees evaluated the perceived effectiveness of their organization's HR practices. After combining data from both waves and excluding incomplete responses, the final multilevel sample consisted of 44 managers and 460 employees, with a median cluster size of 11. Among the employees, approximately 69% were male, and around 59% were aged between 30 and 49 years. About 78% of the employees had been working at their jobs for five years or more, and 73% were working over 30 h per week.

3.5 | Measures

Our analysis includes five hypothesized variables: compliance- and commitment-focused orientations, threat and challenge appraisals, and perceived HR effectiveness. All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (see Table 1).

3.5.1 | Compliance-Focused Orientation

Line managers rated five items developed based on prior research (Hauff et al. 2014; Lepak and Snell 2002; Tyler and Blader 2005; Weaver and Trevino 2001) to assess their orientation toward adherence to rules, regulations, policies, and procedures when supervising employees. These items were developed based on the five themes identified in our qualitative study and carefully adapted to fit the context of the present research. Items included, "I regularly monitor and report employee misconduct" and "I enforce penalties for performance expectations" ($\alpha = 0.82$).

3.5.2 | Commitment-Focused Orientation

Line managers rated five items to assess their orientation toward building strong relationships with employees and fostering their dedication to the organization. These items were also developed based on insights from our qualitative study in Stage 1. Sample items included, "I foster shared organizational values within my team" and "I support my employees' personal and professional goals" ($\alpha = 0.89$).

3.5.3 | Threat Appraisal

Employees rated their appraisal of threats in their job roles based on eight items from Lyons' scale (Lyons 1971). Some items were rephrased to fit the context of our study. Items included, "I worry that I will say or do the wrong things at work" and "I lack the self-confidence to influence decisions at work" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

3.5.4 | Challenge Appraisal

Employees rated their appraisal of challenges in their job roles based on eight items from Lyons' scale (Lyons 1971). Some items were also rephrased to fit the context of our study. Items included, "I tend to focus on the positive aspects of any situation" and "I believe that most stressful situations have the potential for positive outcomes" ($\alpha = 0.87$).

3.5.5 | Perceived HR Effectiveness

This variable comprised nine items reflecting the three themes of organizational HR practices identified in our qualitative study. They were carefully adjusted to capture employees' perceptions of HR effectiveness. Each theme was represented by three items in line with the AMO framework (Jiang et al. 2012; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith 2019; Subramony 2009). Ability-enhancing HR practices were assessed by three aspects of work-related training: I believe my training has helped me "perform more effectively in my role," "keep up with developments in my profession," and "provide better services at work". Motivation-enhancing HR practices were assessed by three aspects of performance management: I believe my performance appraisal has directly improved "my prospects for promotion", "my understanding of the job", and "the way I perform work tasks". Opportunity-enhancing HR practices were measured by three aspects of discretionary work: I believe I am able to influence "the range of tasks I do in my job", "the pace at which I work", and "the order in which I carry out tasks". These items were combined to measure employee perceptions of HR practices ($\alpha = 0.85$).

3.5.6 | Level 2 Control Variables

We controlled for line managers' ratings of the organization's HR practices to ensure that any observed effects were due to the two managerial orientations under investigation, rather than the actual HR practices. This variable was assessed using nine items, measured similarly to our perceived HR effectiveness scale but adapted to reflect actual HR practices.

TABLE 1 | Study variables and response scales.

Study variables and items	Response scale
Line managers' HR orientation	
Compliance-focused orientation	
I ensure strict compliance with organizational rules and policies	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree
I enforce penalties for performance expectations	
I regularly monitor and report employee misconduct	
I regularly discipline employees who violate rules	
I expect employees to follow managerial instructions precisely	
Commitment-focused orientation	
I foster shared organizational values within my team	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree
I support my employees' personal and professional goals	
I evaluate team performance based on organizational values	
I build trust and confidence within my team	
I encourage employee involvement in decision-making	
Cognitive appraisals rated by employees	
Threat appraisal	
I worry that I will say or do the wrong things at work	1 = Never 5 = Very often
I worry about the impact I have on my job	
I am concerned that others will find fault with me	
I feel that difficulties are piling up so that I cannot overcome them	
I lack the self-confidence to influence decisions at work	
I am concerned that others will not approve of me	
I worry about what other people may be thinking about me	
I feel like I have little control over what happens in my job	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Study variables and items	Response scale
Challenge appraisal	
I tend to focus on the positive aspects of any situation	1 = Never 5 = Very often
I often think about what it would be like if I do very well	
I believe that most stressful situations have the potential for positive outcomes.	
Overall, I expect that I will achieve success rather than experience failure	
In general, I look forward to the rewards and benefits of success	
A challenging situation motivates me to increase my efforts	
I anticipate being successful in my chosen pursuits	
I anticipate opportunities to fully test the limits of my abilities	
Perceived HR effectiveness rated by employees	
Ability-enhancing HR practices	
I believe my training has helped me perform more effectively in my role	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree
I believe my training has helped me keep up with developments in my profession	
I believe my training has helped me provide better services at work	
Motivation-enhancing HR practices	
I believe my performance appraisal has directly improved my prospects for promotion	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree
I believe my performance appraisal has directly improved my understanding of the job.	
I believe my performance appraisal has directly improved the way I perform work tasks	
Opportunity-enhancing HR practices	
I believe I am able to influence the range of tasks I do in my job	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree
I believe I am able to influence the pace at which I work	
I believe I am able to influence the order in which I carry out tasks	

Note: Sample size (*N*) = 44 line managers and 460 employees.

Examples of items corresponding to each AMO dimension include: "The organization's training programs are designed to enhance employee performance in their roles," "The organization's performance appraisals are intended to improve employees' promotion prospects," and "The organization's job design practices enable employees to influence the pace of their work." We also controlled for organizational size, acknowledging that the size of the workforce can influence workplace dynamics and the effectiveness of HR practices (Arthur 1994; Lepak and Snell 2002). Compared to smaller organizations, larger organizations face greater operational pressures, which can have a greater influence on employees' workplace experiences (Hauff et al. 2014). Additionally, we controlled for two dimensions of organizational structure: specialization and formalization (Pugh et al. 1968). Line managers assessed each dimension using three items rated on a scale from 1 to 5. Formalization focused on how tasks are divided into distinct roles or functions within the organization, while specialization measured the extent to which rules and procedures are standardized. By controlling for these variables, we mitigated potential confounding effects arising from differences in organizational contexts.

3.5.7 | Level 1 Control Variables

We controlled for four demographic characteristics, including employees' age, gender, tenure, and working hours, to mitigate their possible confounding effects in our model. Prior research has highlighted the significance of these variables in shaping employee experiences in the workplace (Malach-Pines 2005; Schaufeli et al. 2006).

3.6 | Analysis Procedure

This study employed a multilevel analysis approach, with line managers' HR orientation and organizational-level controls assessed at Level 2, while individual-level controls were evaluated at Level 1. Employee cognitive appraisals and perceived HR effectiveness were analyzed across Levels 1 and 2, ensuring both individual differences and cross-level effects were properly estimated. Before estimating our main model, we tested intra-class correlation coefficients (ICCs) for the Level 1 variables to determine the extent of variance attributable to the unit level. The ICC values indicated significant variation in responses across units: for threat appraisal, ICC1 = 0.17 and ICC2 = 0.70; for challenge appraisal, ICC1 = 0.19 and ICC2 = 0.72; and for perceived HR effectiveness, ICC1 = 0.23 and ICC2 = 0.76. These values exceed the recommended thresholds (Bliese 2000), indicating sufficient between-unit variation to justify the use of multilevel analysis. Subsequently, further analysis was conducted using the robust maximum likelihood estimator in the Mplus software program (Version 7.1), which enables the simultaneous analysis of variables measured at different levels (Muthén and Muthén 2010).

A multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model was performed to validate the factorial structure of our main variables across both individual and organizational levels.

Individual-level constructs, including threat appraisal, challenge appraisal, and perceived HR effectiveness, were specified as factors across both levels, while both dimensions of line managers' HR orientations were specified at Level 2. This approach enabled us to establish the alignment between the observed items and the proposed model (Wood et al. 2020). To ensure an appropriate indicator-to-sample ratio and reduce the total number of parameters relative to the sample size, we created parcels for our constructs (Little et al. 2013). Specifically, we created two parcels each for threat and challenge appraisals, as well as three sets of parcels for perceived HR effectiveness. Our five-factor model showed an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 332.45$, df = 120, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.92, and TLI = 0.90).

3.7 | Results

All hypotheses were concurrently examined in a single path analysis with direct and indirect effects. We estimated indirect effects using the product-of-coefficients (*ab*) approach, the default method in Mplus. In this approach, *'a'* represents the regression path between the independent variable and the mediator, and *'b'* represents the regression path between the mediator and the dependent variable (MacKinnon et al. 2007). Table 2 presents the basic statistics and correlations among our study variables, while Table 3 shows the results of our hypothesis testing. As shown in Table 3, line managers' compliance-focused orientation was positively associated with threat appraisal (B = 0.35, SE = 0.15, $p = 0.02$), while commitment-focused orientation was positively associated with challenge appraisal (B = 0.24, SE = 0.06, $p = 0.0$). These findings support our prediction that a managerial approach emphasizing adherence to rules and established organizational protocols increases employees' appraisal of potential harm or risks in their work situation (support for Hypothesis 1). Conversely, managers who emphasize shared values and supportive relationships can inspire employees to appreciate their work situation as an opportunity for learning and growth (full support for Hypothesis 2).

Table 3 further demonstrates that the indirect path from a compliance-focused orientation to perceived HR effectiveness via threat appraisal was negative and marginally significant when controlling for organizational HR practices (ab = −0.05, SE = 0.03, $p = 0.06$, 95% CI = [−0.10, 0.00]). This finding aligns with Hypothesis 3, indicating that when line managers exhibit a control orientation, employees are more likely to appraise the work environment as threatening. This, in turn, raises employee concerns about their workplace experiences, resulting in negative perceptions of HR effectiveness. In contrast, the indirect path from a commitment-focused orientation to perceived HR effectiveness via challenge appraisal was significant and positive after controlling for organizational HR practices (ab = 0.12, SE = 0.05, $p = 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.21]). When line managers foster an environment centered on employee development and mutual trust, employees are more likely to view workplace challenges as opportunities for growth. As a result, employees are inspired to take greater ownership of their tasks, leading to a more favorable perception of HR effectiveness (support for Hypothesis 4).

TABLE 2 | Correlations and descriptive statistics.

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Employee gender	0.31	0.46	—												
2 Employee age	3.64	1.15	0.37***	—											
3 Employee tenure	2.97	0.86	−0.12*	0.02	—										
4 Working hours	0.27	0.44	0.39***	0.31***	−0.17***	—									
5 Organizational HR practices	3.98	0.38	0.02	0.03	−0.10*	0.04	**92**								
6 Organizational size	0.37	0.48	−0.00	0.04	−0.10*	0.02	0.11*	—							
7 Formalized organizational structure	3.27	0.33	0.03	0.09*	−0.08	0.04	0.07	0.53***	**0.60**						
8 Specialized organizational structure	3.66	0.33	−0.04	0.12**	0.00	−0.03	−0.03	0.25***	0.32***	**0.62**					
9 Compliance-focused orientation	2.21	0.45	−0.11*	−0.12*	0.13**	−0.10*	−0.12*	0.01	−0.08	0.07	**0.82**				
10 Commitment-focused orientation	3.72	0.49	−0.02	0.06	0.11*	0.04	0.06	−0.19***	−0.19***	−0.20***	−0.15**	**0.89**			
11 Threat appraisal	3.00	0.89	0.01	0.04	0.03	−0.02	−0.09	0.03	−0.06	0.01	0.24***	−0.30***	**0.92**		
12 Challenge appraisal	3.85	0.62	−0.02	0.01	0.01	−0.02	0.18***	−0.02	0.08	−0.03	−0.27***	0.23***	−0.44***	**0.87**	
13 Perceived HR effectiveness	3.80	0.57	0.04	0.13**	0.01	0.08	0.18***	−0.04	0.04	−0.07	−0.33***	0.34***	−0.50***	0.41***	**0.85**

Note: Sample size (N) = 44 line managers and 460 employees; Reliability coefficients are displayed in bold on the diagonal.

*p < 0.05;

**p < 0.01;

***p < 0.001.

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TABLE 3 | Results of multilevel path analysis.

	Threat appraisal			Challenge appraisal			Perceived HR effectiveness		
	B (SE)	p	95% CI	B (SE)	p	95% CI	B (SE)	p	95% CI
Control variables									
Employee gender	0.01 (0.15)	0.95	−0.28, 0.30	0.02 (0.10)	0.85	−0.18, 0.22	−0.07 (0.09)	0.41	−0.24, 0.10
Employee age	0.07 (0.03)	0.02	0.01, 0.13	−0.02 (0.03)	0.58	−0.08, 0.04	0.04 (0.02)	0.02	0.01, 0.07
Employee tenure	0.00 (0.05)	0.10	−0.10, 0.10	0.03 (0.04)	0.40	−0.04, 0.10	0.00 (0.03)	0.99	−0.06, 0.06
Employee working hours	−0.01 (0.17)	0.94	−0.34, 0.32	−0.10 (0.09)	0.29	−0.28, 0.08	0.07 (0.09)	0.41	−0.10, 0.24
Organizational HR practices	−0.09 (0.14)	0.53	−0.37, 0.19	0.23 (0.11)	0.03	0.02, 0.44	0.05 (0.05)	0.33	−0.05, 0.15
Organizational size	0.17 (0.12)	0.18	−0.07, 0.41	−0.15 (0.12)	0.18	−0.38, 0.07	0.00 (0.06)	0.98	−0.11, 0.12
Formalized organizational structure	−0.41 (0.24)	0.09	−0.88, 0.06	0.35 (0.16)	0.03	0.04, 0.65	−0.01 (0.11)	0.91	−0.22, 0.19
Specialized organizational structure	−0.14 (0.17)	0.42	−0.48, 0.20	0.00 (0.09)	0.97	−0.18, 0.19	−0.05 (0.05)	0.36	−0.15, 0.05
Study variables									
Compliance-focused orientation	0.35 (0.15)	0.02	0.06, 0.64	−0.29 (0.10)	0.00	−0.47, −0.10	−0.11 (0.08)	0.15	−0.26, 0.04
Commitment-focused orientation	−0.54 (0.11)	0.00	−0.75, −0.34	0.24 (0.06)	0.00	0.13, 0.36	0.13 (0.08)	0.09	−0.02, 0.28
Threat appraisal							−0.16 (0.06)	0.01	−0.28, −0.04
Challenge appraisal							0.51 (0.15)	0.00	0.23, 0.79
Mediated effects									
Compliance-focused orientation → Threat appraisal → Perceived HR effectiveness							−0.05 (0.03)	0.06	−0.11, 0.00
Compliance-focused orientation → Challenge appraisal → Perceived HR effectiveness							−0.15 (0.07)	0.03	−0.28, −0.01
Commitment-focused orientation → Threat appraisal → Perceived HR effectiveness							0.09 (0.04)	0.03	0.01, 0.16
Commitment-focused orientation → Challenge appraisal → Perceived HR effectiveness							0.12 (0.05)	0.01	0.04, 0.21

Note: Sample size (N) = 44 line managers and 460 employees.

4 | Discussion

In this paper, we explore the key factors influencing employees' perceptions of HR effectiveness, focusing on their cognitive assessments of the work environment and the broader line managers' approach to people management. This issue has important implications for workplace efficiency and how employees can be motivated to perform and strive for organizational goals (Jiang et al. 2017; Van Beurden et al. 2021). However, much remains unknown about the cognitive mechanisms behind these experiences. Using insights from cognitive appraisal theory (Folkman et al. 1986), we argued that HR implementation at the line-management level is critical in shaping perceived HR effectiveness. We specifically show that line managers' compliance- versus

commitment-focused orientations significantly influence employees' assessments of threats and challenges in their work roles. These assessments, in turn, influence how employees perceive the effectiveness of HR practices. To explore these dynamics, we combined qualitative data from focus groups with a multilevel quantitative research approach, drawing on a diverse participant pool from Nigeria. We offer valuable insights into the nuanced experiences of line managers and employees, while also situating our research within a distinct sociocultural context.

4.1 | Theoretical Implications

Our findings advance the strategic HRM literature in several meaningful ways. First, we build on existing work (e.g., Wang et al. 2020) to address the core issue of why employees within the same organization often have differing perceptions of the HR practices in place. In so doing, we extend the body of work on employee perceptions of HR practices by examining how line managers view their roles in implementing these practices and, in turn, how employees evaluate their effectiveness. This approach strikes at the heart of existing research on HR system implementation and the extent to which employees perceive these systems as valuable (Van Beurden et al. 2021). Employee HR perceptions are critical, as they significantly influence employees' workplace attitudes, behaviors, and overall engagement with their roles and the organization (Kilroy et al. 2017; Nishii et al. 2008). While organizations design HR systems to align with strategic objectives, their ultimate success depends on how employees experience and interpret their implementation (Bowen and Ostroff 2004; Van Beurden et al. 2021). By shifting the focus to perceived HR effectiveness, we contribute to the strategic HRM literature by addressing a crucial yet underexplored dimension of employee HR perceptions. This perspective highlights that the success of HR systems depends not only on their design but also on how employees experience and evaluate them.

Furthermore, by employing the theoretical lens of cognitive appraisal theory, our research provides strategic HRM scholars with an additional set of considerations when delineating the antecedents or determinants of employee HR perceptions. The starting point in much existing research is to consider HR systems as a determinant of employee attitudes and experiences such as engagement, burnout, and turnover intentions (Jensen et al. 2013; Kilroy et al. 2017; Van Beurden et al. 2022). The present study reverses this logic, suggesting that the cognitive experience of threat versus challenge appraisals may influence how employees perceive the effectiveness of HR practices. Employees who perceive threats in their work roles may develop skepticism toward their organization's HR systems, regardless of the system's actual design. They are likely to view these practices more negatively, seeing them as insufficient to alleviate the stress and demands of their jobs. In contrast, under the guidance of a commitment-focused manager who fosters a culture of challenge and growth, employees are more inclined to focus on the positive aspects of HR practices. They perceive these practices as supportive and beneficial, reinforcing their belief in the value and effectiveness of the system.

These findings enhance our understanding of the factors or conditions that influence how employees form their views about HR practices within an organization. Rather than simply noting that employees have disparate perceptions of the same HR system, we provide a theoretical rationale linking managerial perceptions to employee appraisals. By leveraging cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Lazarus 1991), we establish a novel theoretical basis for understanding employees' subjective interpretations of organizational policies and practices. In line with the central premise of this model, our findings demonstrate that the way line managers think about their role may affect how they enact people management activities within their teams. Managers who interpret their role through a compliance lens are more likely to create a workplace where employees perceive threats rather than challenges. These threat assessments ultimately lead to more negative perceptions of the effectiveness of the organization's HR system. Conversely, managers who view their role through a commitment lens are more likely to foster challenge appraisals, which ultimately lead to more positive perceptions of the organization's HR system effectiveness.

Our findings represent an important advancement for knowledge-building in strategic HR scholarship. While the literature in this space has focused on the critical role that line managers play in HR implementation (Kehoe and Han 2020; Pak and Kim 2018), less is known about the theoretical mechanisms that link managers to the HR perceptions of their employees. Beyond this, even less is known about the perceptions of HR system effectiveness that employees gain from their line managers. Based on the helpful categories provided by Kehoe and Han (2020), we propose and find support for the notion that a line manager's HR orientation affects the ways in which practices are implemented, translated, and adapted. Given the sensemaking involved in managing HRs, the line manager's starting point of compliance versus commitment is likely to influence how practices are implemented and communicated to employees, ultimately influencing how effective employees perceive HR systems to be. The findings support this assertion and pave the way for future research into how compliance versus commitment HR orientations influence managerial decision-making regarding HR system implementation and practice deployment.

Further, the results of the analysis reveal that employees' ongoing cognitive assessments of their work environments critically impact their views on workplace resources and opportunities, leading to varied interpretations and reactions to organizational practices (Erez and Isen 2002). Rather than being mere passive recipients of HR practices, employees are organizational actors whose subjective experiences with these practices are crucial in evaluating their effectiveness. This implies that different employees will perceive the same HRM policies differently based on their personal emotions and assessments of the environment. When an organization understands this diversity of perception, it can more effectively tailor its HRM strategies to meet the unique needs and perspectives of its workforce (Jiang et al. 2017; Nishii et al. 2008). In this vein, our research provides a unique perspective to current knowledge by offering theoretical insights into the intricate relationship between employee psychological states and HR implementation.

This all points to a need for more nuanced discussions about the direction of causality among the HR practices implemented

by organizations, employees' perceptions of these practices, and their psychological responses. Traditional process-based models assume that employees first perceive the HR system, which then influences important workplace attitudes such as engagement, commitment, satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Nishii et al. 2008). However, in reality, a complex feedback loop may exist, where employee perceptions and psychological states influence each other in a recursive cycle. This cycle may be such that employees' psychological experiences and mental models significantly shape their perceptions of the organization's HR system's effectiveness. Put differently, the mental representations or schemas employees use to make sense of their job, organization, and workplace relationships reinforce their interpretations and ability to navigate their work environment effectively. This supports important work in strategic HRM that has cautioned against assuming unidirectional relationships in cross-sectional studies (Ogbonnaya et al. 2023; Wright et al. 2005).

4.2 | Practical Implications

The results of our study also point to key implications for business leaders and practitioners, particularly regarding the effective implementation of HR practices. One of the key takeaways is the importance of recognizing the variability in employee experiences within organizations and adopting a holistic approach to support employees through inclusive and supportive workplace cultures. This includes acknowledging that employees may interpret HR practices differently depending on their unique roles, experiences, and managerial contexts. Addressing this variability requires organizations to create environments that prioritize employee well-being and foster trust. In this light, practical strategies may involve training line managers and equipping them with the skills to communicate transparently, deliver consistent feedback, and demonstrate genuine care for employee development and well-being (Ogbonnaya and Babalola 2021). Additionally, organizations should actively engage employees in the design and evaluation of HR practices, which would ensure that their voices are heard and their needs are directly addressed (Alfes et al. 2012). Ultimately, these efforts not only enhance the perceived effectiveness of HR practices but also contribute to a more engaged, resilient, and productive workforce.

More specifically, our study underscores the importance of considering HR practices within the broader context of employees' overall organizational experiences. Organizations must prioritize not only the availability and design of HR systems but also how effectively these systems are perceived by employees. HR practices that fail to align with employees' expectations or needs risk being viewed as ineffective, regardless of their intended purpose. For example, employees who perceive HR practices as overly rigid or misaligned with their personal goals may see them as barriers to success and attribute negative intentions to the managers implementing these changes (Nishii et al. 2008). On the other hand, practices perceived as supportive and well implemented can drive motivation, commitment, and productivity. To address this, organizations and HR practitioners should adopt a holistic approach, tailoring HR initiatives to meet employees' ability, motivation, and opportunity (AMO) needs. Furthermore, regularly assessing and refining HR practices based on employee feedback to address perceived gaps can

further enhance HR practice effectiveness in the eyes of employees. Such comprehensive approaches may include a supportive work environment, an empowering managerial style, opportunities for professional growth, and recognition of achievements (Boon et al. 2019; Van Beurden et al. 2021). Thus, by addressing these interconnected factors, organizations can build a workplace culture that helps enhance the perceived effectiveness of HR practices while mitigating potential stressors.

A third implication is the importance of carefully communicating the rationale behind changes to HR policies and practices across organizational levels. Employees tend to form impressions of new or existing practices based on their overall perceptions of the organization (Van De Voorde and Beijer 2015). Those who view their working environment as restrictive due to managerial emphasis on rule enforcement or compliance may perceive HR practices negatively, seeing them as additional job demands that do not support their personal and professional growth. In contrast, employees who see their environment as supportive are more likely to view changes and initiatives favorably and may even actively participate in their implementation. These employees are generally more receptive to understanding the purpose and benefits of such changes, which is crucial for the overall effectiveness of new policies (Christian et al. 2011). Therefore, to effectively manage employee expectations, it is essential to involve staff in both the development and implementation of HR practices. This approach encourages buy-in and helps foster positive perceptions. Additionally, it is crucial to clearly communicate the reasoning behind the implementation of HR systems. By doing so, organizations can ensure that these practices achieve their intended motivational effects.

Additionally, our study's focus on the Nigerian context provides valuable insights into the cultural nuances of effective people management strategies. Research on HR implementation has predominantly centered on Western organizations (e.g., Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018; Kuvaas et al. 2014; Hauff et al. 2014), often neglecting the unique cultural and contextual factors inherent in non-Western organizational settings. As a result, scholars in the field have traditionally prioritized Western-style understandings of HR perceptions, paying less attention to the importance of culturally adapting people management initiatives to fit local contexts (Townsend et al. 2022). However, in line with growing calls for more research on management practices in non-Western contexts (Wickert et al. 2024), our findings provide insights into how HR practices are adapted to the unique challenges and opportunities within Nigerian workplaces. This is especially pertinent as Nigerian organizations, as with other businesses in the global South, navigate the complexities of rapid economic development and growing globalization (Abdulkarim 2023). By emphasizing this critical context, our research opens avenues for future research on cultural sensitivity in HR implementation.

4.3 | Limitations and Future Research

A key strength of the present study is that our hypotheses are grounded in a well-established theoretical foundation rooted in cognitive appraisal theory. However, it is important to consider the study's limitations when interpreting the findings.

One limitation is that, although we collected multi-level data and spaced out the intervals between data collection points, we did not use longitudinal data with repeated measurements over time. As a result, we cannot establish changes over time in the relationship between variables of interest. We addressed this issue in part by using robust multi-level analysis and drawing on prior research to contextualize our findings. Additionally, the focus groups conducted before our main analysis ensured that our findings were embedded within a practical organizational context. Nevertheless, future research may consider using longitudinal or quasi-experimental data to further test the theoretical relationships proposed in our analysis. This ensures a more thorough understanding of how these relationships evolve over time and under what conditions (Ogbonnaya et al. 2023). Longitudinal data can capture the causal order and temporal dynamics of HR activities (Wright et al. 2005).

In addition, our findings may be extended in future studies to explore the contexts or boundary conditions associated with employees' threat- or challenge-based interpretations of HR practices. This line of inquiry would further clarify when these interpretations are more likely to affect employee behavior and organizational effectiveness. For instance, under the guidance of a competent leader, employees are more likely to view HR practices such as pay-for-performance as challenges, leading to improved work engagement and task completion (Kong et al. 2023). Conversely, when these practices are perceived as threats, work withdrawal and reduced task performance are more likely, especially if leaders do not display warmth toward their employees (Kong et al. 2023). Moreover, HR practices such as continuing education and involvement in decision-making are generally believed to enhance employee empowerment, but only when they are not perceived as forced obligations that raise individual stress levels (Topcic et al. 2016). Ultimately, depending on the circumstances under which HR systems are appraised, they can influence employee well-being and organizational productivity in significantly different ways.

4.4 | Conclusion

The results of our multi-level investigation indicate that line managers' HR orientations and employees' cognitive experiences of threats and challenges in their jobs are critical in shaping perceived HR effectiveness. The results highlight the significant role that line managers' own interpretation of their role within the HR system plays in the appraisals employees make about the effectiveness of the HR system. These results suggest that more attention may be needed to understand the psychological processes that lead to differing perceptions of HR systems than have previously been considered in the macro-HR perspective.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data files for this study are available from the authors upon request. All analytical codes, results, and related materials (including thematic codebooks) have been uploaded to the Open Science Framework (OSF) and are accessible at: https://osf.io/2qhpa/?view_only=2812a83972d8466ea2b49ecc3328e4ee.

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Appendix A

TABLE A1 | Thematic analysis summary.

Themes	Descriptions of themes	Codes	Example quotes
Organization's HR practices			
Skill development initiatives	Emphasizes the importance of HR practices such as professional development training, mentoring programs, and continuous learning in enhancing employee capabilities.	Staff training	"Training programs are crucial, but we need to ensure that they are relevant and accessible for all employees, not just a select few."
		On-the-Job Experience	"In my five years of working here, I've realized that nothing beats hands-on experience in real work situations to develop employees' critical skills."
		Mentoring	"Mentoring is one of the most effective ways to transfer knowledge. It also helps people get along well with each other. This way, both mentors and mentees can learn and feel like they're making a difference. I believe this is a great way for this company to do things."
		Continuous learning and development	"Today's business environment requires that our employees keep learning and acquiring new skills."
		Resource constraints	"Developing our people is vital, but it's hard to make this a reality when budgets and resources don't always match the organization's needs."
Performance management systems	Highlights the need for clear metrics, regular feedback, and appropriate rewards and recognition to improve motivation and performance.	Performance reviews	"Performance reviews should guide and inspire improvement, not feel like a bureaucratic exercise. When the process turns into a box-checking routine, people lose sight of the bigger picture and stop thinking creatively."
		Regular feedback	"Ongoing feedback is more valuable than an annual review. Even my employees will say the same thing—I'm sure. The reason is that it keeps employees on track and allows them to adjust their performance well."
		Appropriate rewards and recognition	"My team members put in their best effort when they feel valued. That's why I always ensure their contributions don't go unnoticed."
		Employee motivation	"When employees see a direct link between their performance and opportunities for career progression, it keeps them inspired and motivated to go above and beyond."

(Continues)

Themes	Descriptions of themes	Codes	Example quotes
Employee empowerment initiatives	Focuses on participatory decision-making, employee collaboration, and giving employees freedom and opportunity to take ownership of their roles.	Participatory decision-making	"When employees have a say in workplace decisions, they become more responsible and engaged. It's one of the things I love about my role. It also makes employees feel good about themselves and like they are really important to the team."
		Job autonomy	"Of course, it makes sense to give employees the freedom to choose how they approach their tasks. This autonomy not only fosters creativity but also enhances efficiency and contentment with one's job."
		Collaborative team working	"I like when employees work together and share knowledge—they simply produce better results. Plus, it makes the workplace a lot more fun and dynamic. My employees enjoy it."
		Task ownership	"In my team, those who take full responsibility for their tasks are more proactive and deliver higher-quality work."
Compliance-focused approach			
Ensuring adherence to established rules	Managers focus on enforcing HR policies to ensure employees comply with organizational guidelines.	Rule adherence	"I feel the need to emphasize a structured work environment where everyone understands the rules and follows them."
		Policy enforcement	"I believe that clear and consistent HR policies keep everyone—including employees, supervisors, and top managers—on the same page. Therefore, ensuring that these policies are followed is all about protecting the integrity of the organization."
		Performance monitoring	"In our unit, managers feel a strong responsibility to consistently monitor employee performance and promptly address any misconduct with appropriate consequences. This approach ensures accountability and upholds team standards."

Themes	Descriptions of themes	Codes	Example quotes
Addressing poor performance	Managers take corrective actions to address underperformance, ensuring accountability and compliance.	Corrective actions	"Managers must step in when employees are not meeting expectations. I just feel it's important to address issues early on and to help employees get back on track. We simply want our teams stay productive—that's all."
		Performance accountability	"In our unit, managers feel a strong responsibility to consistently monitor employee performance and promptly address any misconduct with appropriate consequences. This approach ensures accountability and upholds team standards."
Monitoring misconduct	Managers actively track employee behaviors to prevent rule violations and maintain discipline.	Supervisory oversight	"I have to maintain close supervision and monitor employee activities, but I also make sure to provide support and guidance whenever needed, so everyone can perform at their best—it's just part of my job and a requirement from HR."
		Misconduct tracking	"In our unit, managers feel a strong responsibility to consistently monitor employee performance and promptly address any misconduct with appropriate consequences. This approach ensures accountability and upholds team standards."
Addressing rule violations	Ensuring that violations are appropriately handled to reinforce the organization's policies.	Responding to rule violation	"If employees disregard company policies, we have to take swift action to maintain discipline and fairness in the workplace."
		Preventing rule violations	"Managers must proactively ensure that all team members understand and adhere to the established rules to prevent any violations."
		Proactive rule enforcement	"By actively enforcing organizational rules, I can maintain a disciplined work environment. Plus, it helps everyone know what is expected of them, which makes things run more smoothly at work. This is what the top managers want."

(Continues)

Themes	Descriptions of themes	Codes	Example quotes
Ensuring employees follow directives	Managers emphasize the importance of employees closely following instructions to maintain organizational efficiency.	Directive enforcement	""I understand we are not here to micromanage or police employees' every move. At the same time, things tend to fall apart when there is no clear direction. Thus, to maintain efficiency, I think employees must adhere to instructions—it's that simple."
		Managerial control	"Good managers make sure that all team activities are in line with the company's standards. Think about it, should we establish clear expectations and guide staff members to follow them? or should we manage employees without direction and watch as things quickly become a mess?"
Commitment-focused approach			
Promoting shared values	Managers strive to foster a culture that aligns employee values with organizational goals.	Organizational support	"I think our role as managers is to build trust in our teams, guide them in their career paths, and ensure their decisions reflect organizational goals."
		Shared values	"We want employees to feel connected to core values, especially in their daily work. When people see those values reflected in their tasks and decisions, it creates a stronger sense of purpose. Seriously, it's not just about words, it's about making organizational values a lived experience in everything we do."
Fostering professional growth	HR practices that prioritize career development and skill enhancement among employees.	Skill enhancement	"My responsibility is to ensure that employees have access to training and mentoring—I want to help them grow professionally."
		Career development	"I think our role as managers is to build trust in our teams, guide them in their career paths, and ensure their decisions reflect organizational goals."
		Creating opportunities for growth	"People grow when they are allowed to learn, try new things, and see the results of their work right away. This is something I really believe. Moreover, what really matters is giving employees opportunities to apply what they've learnt, solve important problems, and challenge themselves."

(Continues)

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Themes	Descriptions of themes	Codes	Example quotes
Aligning performance with organizational goals	Managers work to ensure that employees' contributions are in sync with business objectives.	Keeping everyone aligned	"For things to move well, every employee should understand how their role supports the broader company objectives."
		Performance expectations	"I think our role as managers is to build trust in our teams, guide them in their career paths, and ensure their decisions reflect organizational goals."
		Reinforcing a shared vision	"Our role as managers or supervisors—whatever we choose to call ourselves—is to consistently remind employees of our company's direction and ensure their efforts contribute to our long-term success."
Building trust	Managers focus on creating an environment of trust, transparency and reliability.	Trusting employees to perform	"Employees perform better when they trust us and also feel supported by us. It's about creating an environment where people feel empowered to do their best work and show more confident in taking initiative."
		Open communication	"I strongly believe that trust grows when there's open and honest communication between managers and their team. t's not enough to just hold meetings and give updates; people need to feel heard, valued, and comfortable sharing what's really on their minds."
		Trust building	"I think our role as managers is to build trust in our teams, guide them in their career paths, and ensure their decisions reflect organizational goals."
		Leading with transparency	"Of course, employees don't just want to be told what to do. From what I've seen, managers who are honest about difficulties, goals, and expectations build trust and help everyone move in the same direction."
Facilitating effective decision-making	Encouraging employees to make informed decisions that align with the company's strategic direction.	Employee empowerment	"The truth is that employees who feel empowered to make decisions will make more meaningful contributions at work. Actually, that has been my experience working here."
		Informed decision-making	"I think our role as managers is to build trust in our teams, guide them in their career paths, and ensure their decisions reflect organizational goals."

Note: We conducted six focus groups, each consisting of 5–10 participants. The quotes are from individual participants.