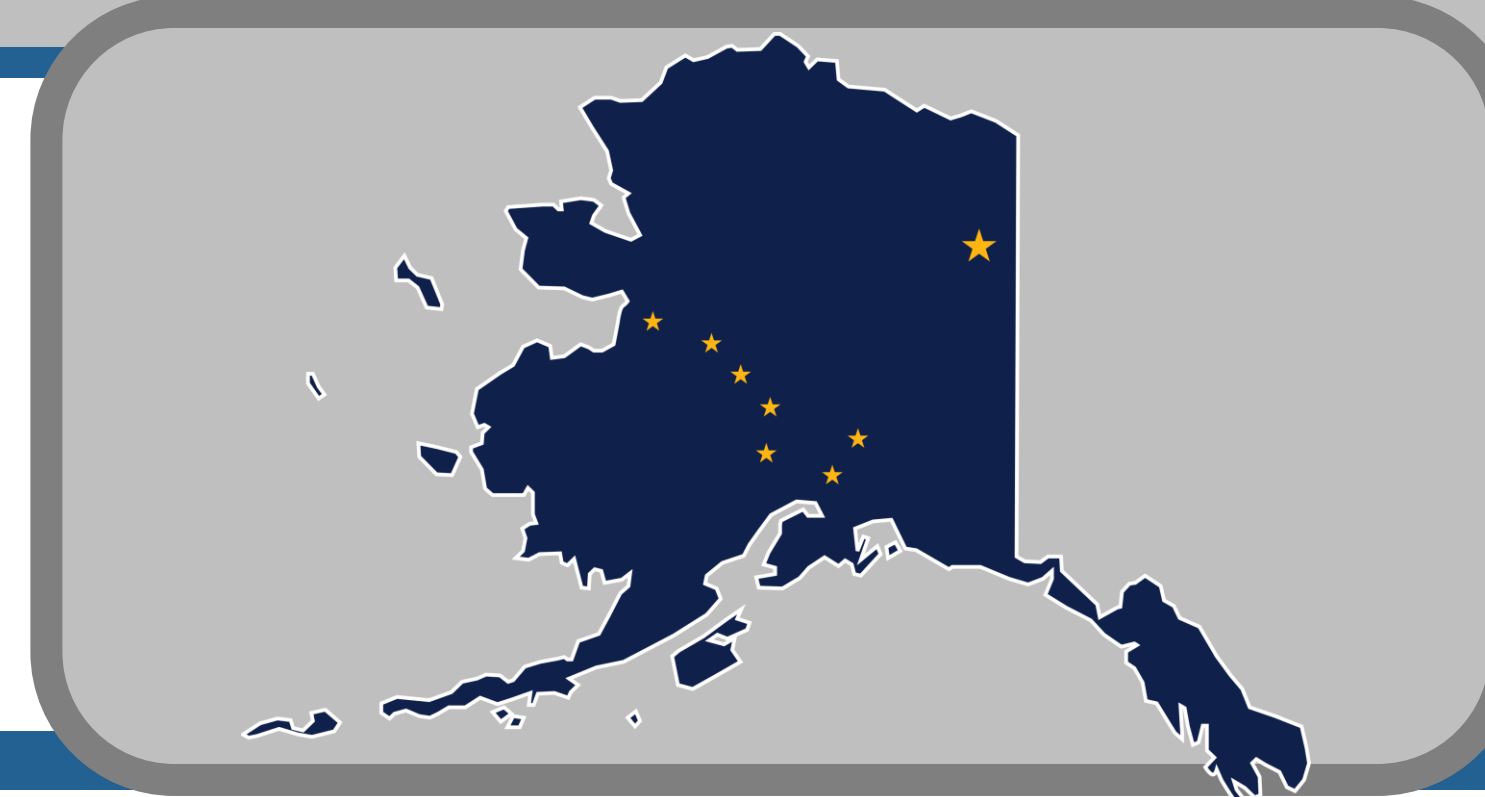


Purpose-Driven Leadership Behaviors Reduce Suicide Risk and Improve Lethality Outcomes in Arctic Operational Units

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Project Background

“Alaska is the most strategic place on earth.”
Brig. Gen. Bill Mitchell
(testimony before Congress, 1935)



- Alaska’s US military installations experience significantly more deaths by suicide compared to the majority of military installations.
- Soldiers in rural and remote locations such as the Arctic may experience unique factors impacting suicide risk.
- Given increased death by suicide and general lack of response to conventional intervention, novel evidence-based suicide prevention programs must be explored.
- The Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC) Report (2022) recommends, among other lines of effort, identifying early indicators of problematic leadership, fostering a supportive environment, revising suicide prevention training, and promoting a culture of lethal means safety.
- These lines of effort aid us in our focus on downstream suicide prevention.

Introduction

- Operational military units—especially those in cold, remote regions—face barriers that limit access to clinical behavioral health services



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Protective Factors

TEACHINGS: “words to live by, instructions”
Qanruyutet:

AWARENESS — “The point of becoming aware.”
Ellangneq
Being aware of the consequences of one’s own actions and how they affect family and community. Being conscious and developing a relationship with Ellam Yua/God.

SELF-EFFICACY — “I can.”
Piyungsaung
A person’s belief and confidence that he/she can solve their own problems.

COMMUNAL-MASTERY — “We are strong.”
Kayuukut
Confidence that personal problems can be solved by working together with other people, such as family and community members.

WANTING TO BE A ROLE MODEL — “I want to lead.”
Civiliqacwctua
Setting an example for others by choosing to live life in a good way. A person’s actions can influence others’ behavior.

GIVING — Someone who is compassionate, generous
Nakleqalria
Sharing with others and contributing to family and community. This cultivates a sense of purpose and responsibility.

- The Purpose Driven Leadership (PDL) intervention is an upstream approach to train frontline noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to reinforce purpose, identity, and mission alignment through routine leader behaviors, thereby strengthening protective psychological factors and enhancing readiness.

Methods

- A quasi-experimental longitudinal design was embedded within an operational unit.
- Thirty-nine NCOs received PDL training, and 451 junior enlisted subordinates (E1–E4) were assessed at two time points.
- Employ CBPR to identify, understand, and flesh out unit-informed protective factors.
- Leaders completed pre- and post-training surveys assessing leadership intentions and implementation outcomes.
- Subordinates completed division-wide surveys approximately one month before leader training and four months after.
- Measures included Purpose in Life, Suicide Cognitions Scale, Organizational Commitment, Authentic Leadership, and a lethality measure.
- Linear mixed-effects models and moderated mediation analyses evaluated whether leader behavior influenced purpose in life, suicide-related cognitions, and lethality.

Results

- Results indicated that the PDL training was associated with improvements in NCO outcomes.
- Results also demonstrated that in the subordinate sample, the relationship between PDL behavior and PIL was stronger among Soldiers whose leaders completed the PDL training.
- Moderated mediation analyses confirmed that training participation significantly moderated the effect of PDL on PIL and revealed that PDL reduced suicidal cognitions through PIL only when leaders had participated in the training.



Constructs	Implications
Unit Cohesion	Synchronization
Lethality	Effectiveness
Peer Support	Connection
Unit Morale	Trust
Career Intention	Retention
Wish to Live	Hope
Suicide Risk	Death by Suicide
Burnout	Fatigue

Figure 1. PDL Training on Subordinate Suicide Cognition

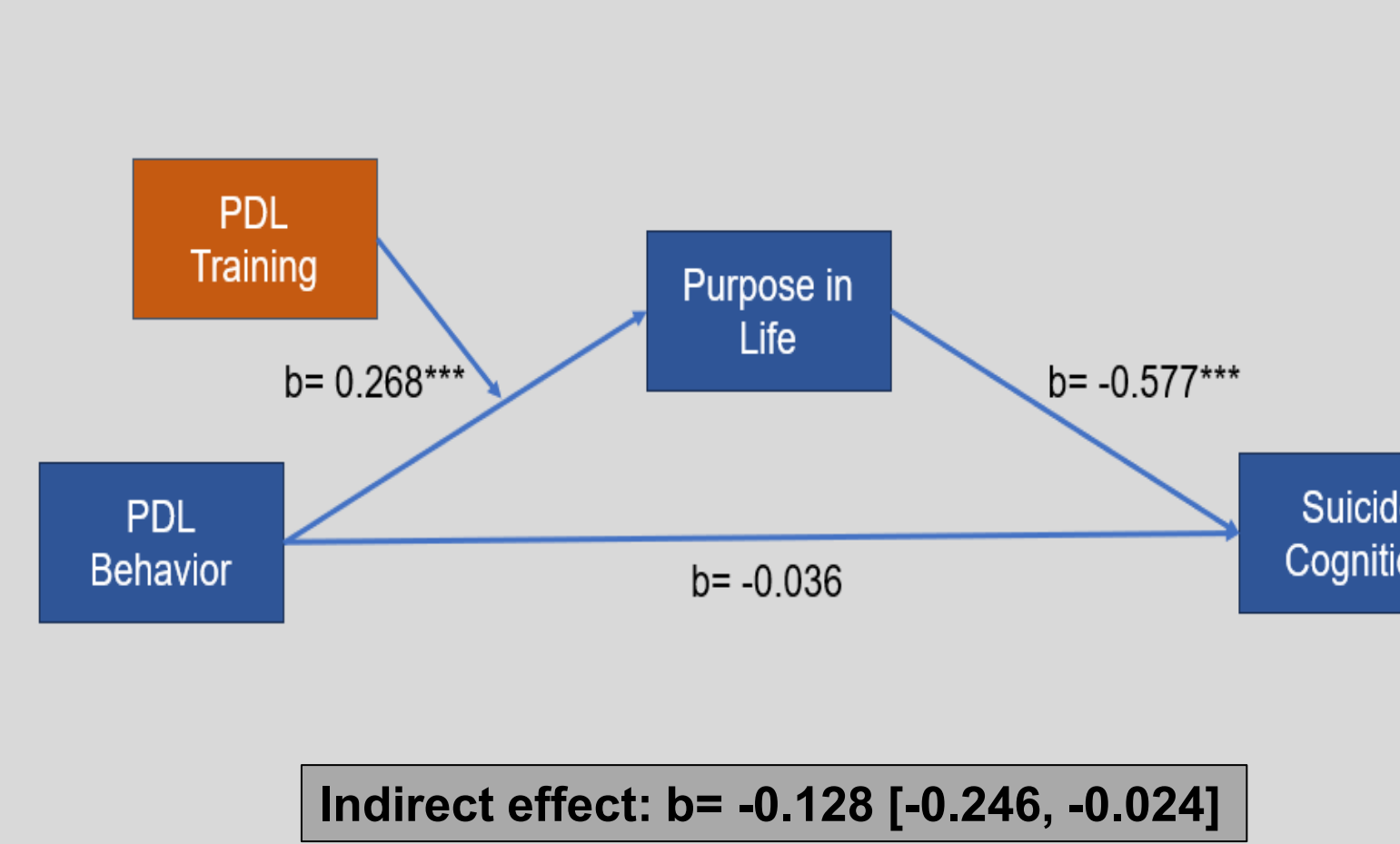
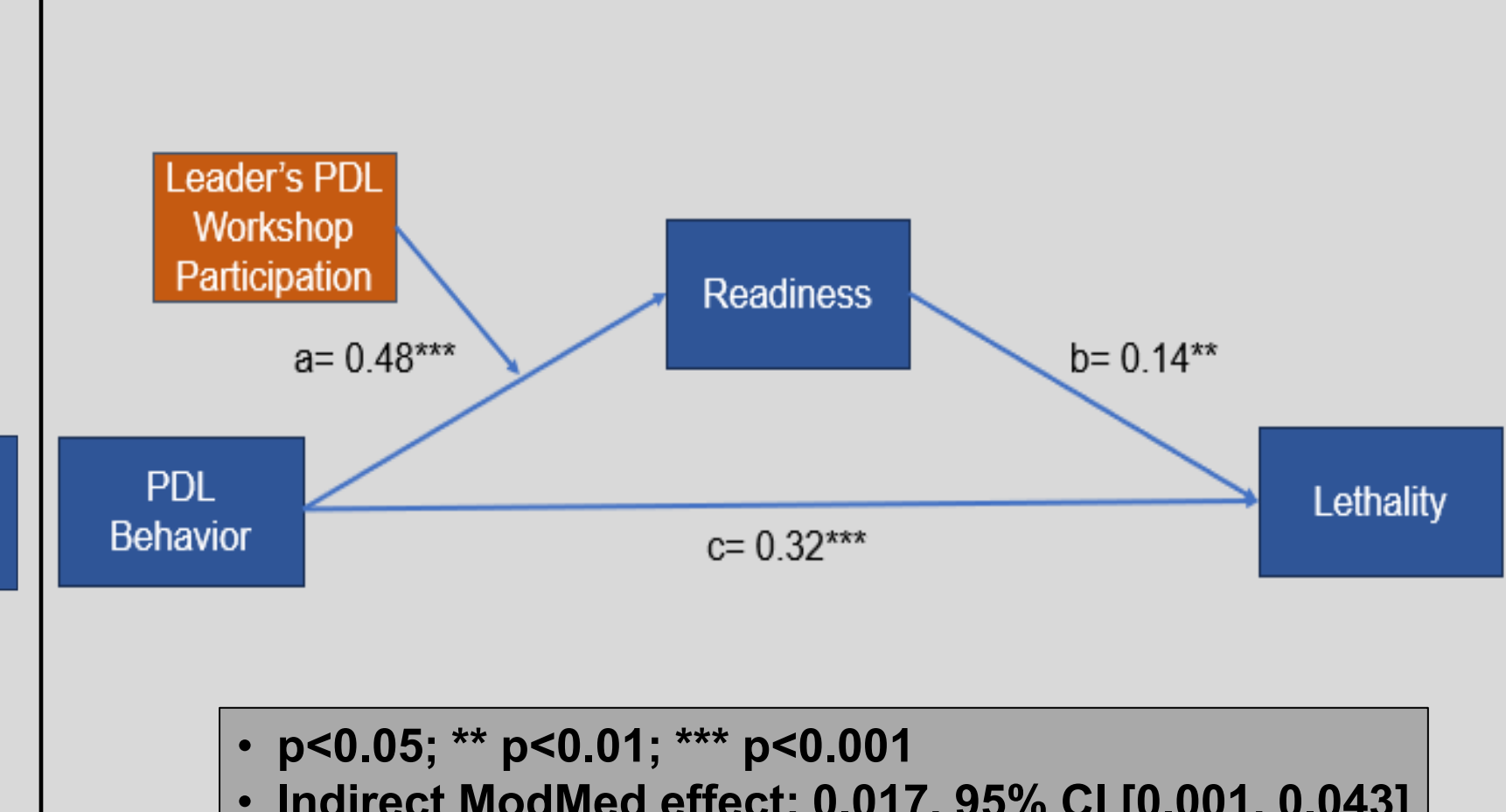


Figure 2. PDL Participation on Lethality



Discussion

- The leader-provided purpose intervention suggests that purposeful leadership behaviors can significantly influence protective psychological factors in operational units.
- Enhancing purpose in life reduced suicide-related cognitions while simultaneously improving readiness indicators, indicating no trade-off between behavioral health and performance.
- Leader-driven improvements in purpose contributed to both reduced risk and increased operational effectiveness. Because PDL intervention is leader-delivered and non-clinical, it is well-suited for expeditionary environments with limited behavioral health access.

Scholarship

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