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Title: Paradoxical Leader Behavior and Followers' Ambidexterity: The Moderating Role of Followers' Paradox Mindset

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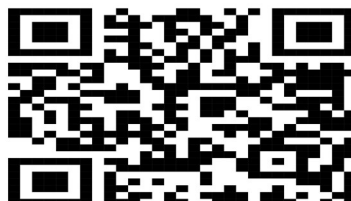
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Paradoxical Leader Behavior and Followers' Ambidexterity: The Moderating Role of Followers' Paradox Mindset

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Abstract

In response to the ever-increasing demand for individual ambidexterity in organizations, we propose paradoxical leadership as a highly effective approach for managing this challenge. Integrating trait theory, paradox perspective, and social learning theory, we argue how leaders' core self-evaluation traits serve as antecedents of PLB and how and when it improves followers' ambidexterity. We also examined how the relationship between followers' ambidexterity and paradoxical leader behavior (PLB) is moderated by their paradox mindset. We employed a time-lagged, multi-source survey design, with data collected in three phases from telecom organizations in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. At Time 1, data on leaders' CSE traits and demographics were collected from 200 supervisors. At Time 2 (after a 10-day interval), 680 subordinates provided ratings of their supervisors' PLB and reported their own paradox mindset and demographics. While at Time 3, supervisors also rated their subordinates' ambidexterity (N = 600). The final matched sample comprised 600 subordinates nested under 200 supervisors. Data was analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS, and PROCESS macro (Model 14) in SPSS was used to conduct moderated mediation analyses. Overall, our findings largely supported our predictions. More specifically, our findings show that leaders' core self-evaluation traits have a positive indirect effect on followers' ambidexterity through paradoxical leader behavior. Our results further showed that followers' paradoxical mindset strengthens the effect of paradoxical leader behavior on followers' ambidexterity. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Keywords: *Paradoxical Leadership, Ambidexterity, Paradox Mindset, Core Self-Evaluation Traits, Self-Efficacy*

1. Introduction

The increasing competition among today's business organizations requires individuals to engage actively in ambidexterity (balancing both exploitation and exploration) as it has become essential for the competitiveness of organizations like never before (Mathias, 2014; Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020). This dual capability allows employees to optimize current practices while also seeking innovative approaches to their work, thereby contributing to organizational agility and long-term success (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016; Mom, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2009). However, balancing these contradictory demands poses significant cognitive and behavioral challenges at the individual level (Good & Michel, 2013; Gupta, Smith, & Shalley, 2006; M. J. Zhang, Zhang, & Law, 2022). Thus, the question of how to foster individual ambidexterity has engaged scholars and practitioners alike.

Researchers engaged in this domain of investigation have considered leadership as the main factor (Y.-Y. Chang, Chang, Chen, Chen, & Chang, 2019; Lawrence, Tworoger, Ruppel, & Yurova, 2022; Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020; Zhaohui, 2018). It has been identified that individual

ambidexterity involves contradictory demands or paradoxes such as individuals must effectively balance both exploitation and exploration activities. Exploitation is associated with refining or improving existing technologies and processes (Katila & Ahuja, 2002; O'reilly Iii & Tushman, 2008). While exploration involves experimentation, variation and introducing new technologies and knowledge (Gupta et al., 2006; Lavie, Stettner, & Tushman, 2010; Lubatkin, Simsek, Ling, & Veiga, 2006). Unfortunately, there are limited studies that have linked leadership with individual ambidexterity (Akbar et al., 2024; Bhatti & Malik, 2024; Nasution, Soemaryani, Yunizar, & Hilmiana, 2024; Shahid, Anwar Ul Haq, Di Virgilio, & Ahmed, 2023; M. J. Zhang et al., 2022). In this study, we described the role of paradoxical leader behavior in enhancing followers' ambidexterity through relying on paradox approach. The paradox approach describes that leaders who captured contradictory demands will unlock new potential in followers (Schaap & Vanlommel, 2024).

Leaders play a key role in harmonizing and integrating paradoxes inherent in an organizational setting (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradoxical leader behavior includes the behaviors that appear contradictory but are actually related in order to meet the demands of followers and the structure at the same time. (Y. Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015). However, both sides of behavior are interrelated and complementary, and managing them effectively is a key determinant of organizational performance (J. E. KIM, 2021). Based on the paradox approach, we suggest that paradoxical leader behavior can embrace the contradictory elements of ambidexterity, thereby enhancing followers' ambidexterity. Traditional leadership theories continue to extensively influence leadership discourse and practice (Dickson, 2023; Dugan, 2024), even though they struggle to address the conflicting, dual demands and paradoxes faced by dynamic organizations (Aksakal & Ulucan, 2024; Harrison, 2025; Martin, 2018). Leadership theories normally operate within frameworks that maintain consistent and stable behaviors while presuming a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Yet, these assumptions have become unsustainable in today's ambiguous and uncertain organizational environment where it is expected from leaders to address contradictory demands. The emergence of the concept of paradoxical leader behavior (PLB) challenges these traditional leadership theories through considering an integrative approach to manage dual demands (Lee, Lyubovnikova, Zheng, & Li, 2023). It considers that leaders are sense makers and can effectively deal with paradoxes instead of eliminating them (Lin, Zhou, & Hou, 2024).

We further drew on the social learning theory (Decker, 1986; Manz & Sims Jr, 1980; Sims Jr & Manz, 1982) which suggests that individuals learn through monitoring and modeling the behavior of others, especially those who are in leadership positions (Reed et al., 2010). In the context of PLB, leaders demonstrate behaviors that embody the balance of seemingly contradictory demands, such as flexibility and consistency, control and autonomy, or short-term efficiency and long-term innovation (Backhaus, Reuber, Vogel, & Vogel, 2022; Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018; Tan, Hao, Gao, & Wojtczuk-Turek, 2024; Y. Zhang et al., 2015). So, we argue that followers, through observational learning, begin to mirror these paradoxical behaviors.

Followers may recognize the potential benefits of ambidexterity under paradoxical leadership, they are not always motivated to handle the conflicting demands that come with it (DeFillippi, Grabher, & Jones, 2007). The literature also does not explicitly address the possibility that leaders may communicate contradictory signals to their followers. We posit that the effectiveness of leaders' paradoxical behaviors in influencing followers' ambidexterity may largely depend on how favorably followers evaluate and respond to them. Followers' dispositional traits, such as a paradox mindset, help them understand and navigate the paradoxes or tensions that arise in the workplace

(Liu, Xu, & Zhang, 2020; Yin, 2022). A paradox mindset is defined as “the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tensions” (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018, p. 26). Followers with paradox mindset will remain positive and will effectively deal with paradoxes (Sleesman, 2019). Based on this assumption, we argue that followers’ paradox mindset will strengthen the relationship between paradoxical leader behavior and followers’ ambidexterity.

While we believe that paradoxical leadership enhances followers' ambidexterity, there is still much to understand about the factors that enable leaders to adopt such behaviors. Identifying the antecedents of paradoxical leader behavior (PLB) is crucial, as it will reveal the characteristics of leaders who are more likely to adopt such behaviors. Researchers have explored several antecedents that help leaders to engage in paradoxical leader behavior e.g., holistic thinking, integrative thinking, organic vs mechanistic structure (Y. Zhang et al., 2015); and Big Five personality traits (Ishaq, Bashir, & Khan, 2021). However, there is a gap in understanding how more individual-level traits specifically core self-evaluations (CSE) influence a leader’s ability to engage in paradoxical behaviors. Judge and Bono (2001) conducted meta-analysis and determined that core self-evaluation traits are a better predictor of performance outcomes than Big Five personality traits. Core self-evaluations are referred to as “basic conclusions or underlying assumptions that individuals consider true about themselves”. The construct of core self-evaluation traits mainly includes four dispositional traits i.e., generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional stability, and locus of control (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). CSE traits represent a piece of the personality domain that is not adequately captured in the Big Five personality traits (Bono & Judge, 2003b).

Unlike the Big Five, which are largely descriptive, CSE is evaluative and motivational in nature, emphasizing individuals’ internal beliefs about their competence, control, stability, and worth. Moreover, while the Big Five traits are typically treated as orthogonal and independent, the components of CSE are conceptually interconnected and synergistic and collectively reflect a stable self-concept (Rauthmann, 2024). Existing research often views paradoxical leader behavior (PLB) as an unchanging leadership style instead of recognizing it as an adaptive behavioral set influenced by fundamental psychological constructs (Batool, Raziq, Sarwar, Saleem, & Obaid, 2023; Y. Yang, Li, Liang, & Zhang, 2021; M. J. Zhang et al., 2022). There are limited investigations into the dispositional traits that incline leaders towards paradoxical leader behavior (PLB) engagement (Ishaq et al., 2021; Y. Zhang & Han, 2019; Y. Zhang et al., 2015), particularly core self-evaluation (CSE) traits remain largely absent from current discussions, despite their well-established link to adaptive leadership and positive workplace outcomes (T.-Y. Kim, Liden, Kim, & Lee, 2015). This study also aims to extend the body of knowledge on the relationship between core self-evaluation (CSE) traits (namely generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional stability, and locus of control) and paradoxical leadership orientation.

Our research makes several significant contributions to the literature on paradoxical leader behavior. First, it examines the direct effect of leaders’ CSE traits on their paradoxical leadership behavior, thereby addressing a gap in the literature on leadership antecedents. Second, it explores the mediating role of paradoxical leader behavior in the relationship between leaders' CSE traits and followers’ individual ambidexterity, offering deeper insights into how leader traits influence follower outcomes. Third, the study investigates the moderating effect of followers’ paradox mindset on the relationship between paradoxical leader behavior and individual ambidexterity, shedding light on the conditions under which paradoxical leadership is most effective.

Finally, by integrating trait theory, paradox theory, and social learning theory, this research proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework that links leader CSE traits, leadership behaviors, and follower-level ambidextrous outcomes. In doing so, the study contributes to the broader discourse on how to develop leadership capabilities that enhance followers' ambidexterity in complex organizational environments.

2. Hypotheses Development

2.1 Leaders' Core Self-Evaluation Traits and Paradoxical Leader Behavior (PLB)

Trait theory posits that an individual's dispositional traits predict his/her behavior in a leadership position (Allport, 1927; Colbert, Judge, Choi, & Wang, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Theory suggests that a leader's behavior in different situations can be predicted by their stable personality traits (Chao & Chang, 2013; Stogdill & Shartle, 1948; Zaccaro, 2007). These traits influence how a leader reacts towards contradictory situations like demanded in paradoxical leadership (Ishaq et al., 2021). Hence in this study, we argue that the ability of paradoxical leaders to navigate tensions such as flexibility versus consistency, may be influenced by inherent traits captured by CSE. Paradoxical leader behavior is related to leaders' ability to manage organization and followers demands simultaneously. Paradoxical leaders accentuate on individual needs but also focus on organizational structural demands to avoid disparities (Pan, 2021; Pearce, Wassenaar, Berson, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2019). According to the paradox approach, these conflicting demands (fulfilling organizational and individual needs simultaneously) are highly challenging. Organizations have to face drastic consequences if leaders either totally ignore these conflicting demands or choose one pole over another (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradoxical leaders embrace workplace paradoxes and perform effectively in conflicting situations (Collins, 2023).

Judge, Locke, Durham, and Kluger (1997, p. 168) defined core self-evaluations as "fundamental premises that individuals hold about themselves and their functioning in the world". The construct of CSE mainly includes four dispositional traits i-e generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional stability, and locus of control (Judge et al., 1997). Self-esteem refers to individuals' assessment (positive or negative) of their self-worth (King, 1997). It is a fundamental trait as it serves as foundation for an individuals' own self appraisal (Harter, 2013). Previous researchers demonstrated that self-esteem is a dominant trait that influences leadership effectiveness. Individuals with high self-esteem consider themselves worthy and are more likely to engage in leadership roles (Bass, 1960; Johnson & Blom, 2007; Korn, 2022; Mason, Mason, & Mathews, 2016). Therefore, from a trait theory perspective, we propose that individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to adopt paradoxical leadership behaviors with ease, as their confidence, openness to change & adaptability enables them to effectively manage conflicting demands when placed in leadership roles (Wang, Zhang, He, & Bi, 2022). However, individuals with low self-esteem consider organizational paradoxes as highly challenging and their ability to perform in these circumstances will be hindered (Dickinson, 2009; Schwartz, 2015).

Generalized self-efficacy (GSE) refers to the estimation of an individual's capacity to perform and cope successfully within multiple complex situations (Bandura, 1997). GSE determines how individuals will respond to challenging situations and solve problems (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Judge and Piccolo (2004) demonstrated that high GSE enhances leadership effectiveness as believing in their capabilities, they will be willing to take initiative and will manage contradictions. These attributes make GSE a critical antecedent to PLB, which requires leaders to manage contradictions and tensions effectively. In this study we argue that leaders with high GSE have a

strong conviction in their capabilities, which enables them to manage contradictory demands and engage in paradoxical leader behavior. So, considering the above arguments, we propose that:

H₁ (a): Self-esteem will be positively related to paradoxical leader behavior.

H₁ (b): Generalized self-efficacy will be positively related to paradoxical leader behavior.

Emotional stability is related to an individual's ability to remain resilient and relax in stressful situations and is the critical trait that influences leadership effectiveness. Leaders with high-emotional stability will less engage in negative emotions such as anxiety, stress or emotional impulsiveness (Judge & Ilies, 2002). Bono and Judge (2004), described that leaders with high emotional stability will be more likely to engage in transformational leadership as they will stay stable and will inspire confidence in followers. Literature also showed that individuals with low emotional stability perceive themselves, others, and the world negatively (Li & Ahlstrom, 2016; Niemann, Wisse, Rus, Van Yperen, & Sassenberg, 2011; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005). This study posits that emotional stability allows leaders to facilitate discussions that include diverse & conflicting opinions. Such leaders will handle conflicting demands without indulging in stress and anxiety and will engage in paradoxical leadership when it comes to people management. Hence, it is proposed that:

H₁ (c): Emotional stability will be positively related to paradoxical leader behavior.

Individuals who have an internal locus of control will consider themselves accountable for all circumstances and will be calmer and more secure in stressful situations (Glass & Singer, 1972). While individuals with an external locus of control will consider nothing is in their control and blame external factors in stressful situations (Daniels & Guppy, 1997). Literature showed that internal locus of control is correlated with numerous positive leader traits such as decision making, wellbeing, resilience and problem solving (April, Dharani, & Peters, 2012; Dumitriu, Timofti, Nechita, & Dumitriu, 2014; Škudienė, Augutytė-Kvedaravičienė, Demeško, & Suchockis, 2018). It is argued in this study that in leadership positions individuals with an internal locus of control will be better able to manage paradoxical situations as they can control the environment to produce anticipated results. Hence, we propose that:

H₁ (d): Internal locus of control will be positively related to paradoxical leader behavior.

2.2 Paradoxical Leader Behavior and Followers' Ambidexterity

Paradoxical leader behavior is related to leaders' ability to manage organization and followers demands simultaneously (R. M. Yang & Lin, 2020). Y. Zhang et al. (2015) outlined a pathway, grounded in paradox theory, through which paradoxical leadership influences followers' outcomes—specifically by providing clear role expectations and by role modeling how to manage conflicting work demands. Following this pathway, the present study argues that paradoxical leadership influences followers' ambidexterity. Paradoxical leaders present competing role expectations to their followers, such as granting them autonomy to control specific work processes while simultaneously expecting adherence to organizational rules and standards. (Waldman & Bowen, 2016). Followers are required to adjust their behavioral protocols as they try to think differently to bring new results and at the same time they try to bring improvements in existing methods. As a result, under paradoxical leadership, followers tend to focus on both exploration and exploitation activities rather than concentrating on just one.

Furthermore, social interactions also influence individuals' behavior, as proposed by social learning theory. We argue that followers can more effectively manage both exploitation and exploration activities by viewing paradoxical leaders as role models. Through observing leaders'

behavior (role modeling), followers also modify their behavior as followers' behavioral outcomes are linked with leaders' behavior (Manz & Sims Jr, 1981). Followers get the opportunity to see paradoxical leaders as embracing workplace paradoxes and performing effectively even in conflicting situations. They get the opportunity to learn this skill of managing tensions and adopting "both-and" strategy (Batool et al., 2023; Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019). By observing role models, followers actually adopt similar values and attitudes, rather than simply mirroring their behaviors (Bandura, 1977; N. Yang, Chen, & Wang, 2024). In the role modeling process, followers learn the problem-solving techniques of paradoxical leaders and apply this to similar situations (Geng, Wang, Fan, & Shan, 2023). As a result, followers become more skilled at switching between exploration and exploitation activities, successfully managing the tensions inherent in ambidexterity (Lee et al., 2023). Thus, through the role modeling and expectations set by paradoxical leaders, followers learn to embrace the tensions between the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation. This enables them to identify synergistic opportunities and move between these demands more flexibly, resulting in higher levels of individual ambidexterity (Kundi, Aboramadan, & Abualigah, 2023; M. J. Zhang et al., 2022). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: Paradoxical leader behaviors will be positively associated with followers' ambidexterity.

2.3 Mediating Role of Paradoxical Leader Behaviors

Individual ambidexterity has become crucial for organizations to attain competitive advantage (Awan, Kalyar, & Saleem, 2022, p. 28). Individuals will be considered more ambidextrous if they engage in both behaviors. However, individuals consider it challenging to engage in both exploitation and exploration activities simultaneously (Zheng, Feng, Xie, Zhao, & Wu, 2023). Trait theory posits that leader personality traits have a significant impact on followers' performance outcomes particularly through leadership behavior. But there is limited literature relating leader personality traits with individual's performance outcomes (Aronson, Reilly, & Lynn, 2006; Ng, Ang, & Chan, 2008). Recent advancements in trait-leadership theory suggests that leader personality influences distally on follower performance outcomes through their impact on more immediate traits (Zaccaro, Green, Dubrow, & Kolze, 2018). Since core self-evaluation traits are viewed as higher-order personality traits, our research suggests that the influence of a leader's core self-evaluation on a follower's ambidexterity is more effectively understood through the lens of paradoxical leadership behaviors.

Leaders with high self-esteem are more likely to promote risk-taking behavior among followers. They give confidence to followers to engage in innovation (Ding & Yu, 2020; Matzler, Bauer, & Mooradian, 2015). Smith and Lewis (2011) demonstrated that leaders who successfully deal with the paradoxes are more likely to encourage ambidexterity among followers. Furthermore, high generalized self-efficacy in leaders makes them more resilient and adaptable. Leaders with such traits allow their followers to effectively navigate the complexities of ambidexterity (M. S. Kim, Phillips, Park, & Gully, 2023). Literature showed that leaders with high GSE can influence followers' job performance and job satisfaction (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Hence in this study, we argue that leaders with higher self-esteem and high GSE may inspire their followers to practice ambidexterity by adopting a paradoxical approach to management through paradoxical leader behaviors.

Leaders with ILOC always take initiatives and find new opportunities for improvement. Such leaders inspire followers to indulge in innovative behaviors through role modeling (Spector, 1988). Similarly leaders with emotional stability maintain their composure in challenging situations and

navigate paradoxes with ease. They take work role challenges and are able to motivate their followers to engage in positive performance outcomes (Andrade, Mendes, & Franco, 2024). In this study, we argue that leaders with ILOC and with high emotional stability not only engage in paradoxical behaviors but also create a climate that further empowers followers to develop their ambidextrous capabilities. Considering the above discussion, we can hypothesize that:

H₃: Leaders' a) self-esteem b) generalized self-efficacy c) internal locus of control d) emotional stability will be positively related to followers' ambidexterity.

H₄: Paradoxical leader behaviors mediate the association between leaders' a) self-esteem b) generalized self-efficacy c) internal locus of control d) emotional stability and followers' ambidexterity.

2.4 Moderating Role of Followers' Paradox Mindset

Literature showed that the effectiveness of a leader's paradoxical behavior is highly dependent on the extent to which followers consider such behaviors positive and then respond in a similar manner (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Follower outcomes are influenced by both leader behaviors and the individual characteristics of the followers themselves (Zhu, Wang, Zheng, Liu, & Miao, 2013). Paradoxical leaders meet both structural and followers' demands simultaneously which can create a negative influence on some followers (Perry, Witt, Penney, & Atwater, 2010). Followers with a paradox mindset will embrace contradictions and generate productive outcomes even in complex and ambiguous situations (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2012). A paradox Mindset is described as "the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tension" (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). A paradox mindset gives followers an alternative way of thinking (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 385). Followers' paradox mindset determines their reaction towards paradoxical leader behavior. We argue that when followers possess a strong paradox mindset, they may be more receptive to the complexities presented by their leaders, enhancing their ambidextrous capabilities. Considering the above arguments, it can be hypothesized that:

H₅: Followers' paradox mindset moderates the positive relationship between PLB and followers' ambidexterity such that the relationship is more evident for followers with high levels of paradox mindset than for those with low levels.

H₆: Followers' paradox mindset moderates the indirect relationship between leaders' a) self-esteem b) generalized self-efficacy c) locus of control d) emotional stability and followers' ambidexterity through paradoxical leader behavior.

2.5 Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework of this study has been supported by social learning theory and trait theory of leadership. The trait theory of leadership holds that a person's characteristics are a major predictor of their leadership behavior because they help to explain why they behave in a particular way in a leadership role (Allport, 1927). In people management, PLB is defined by leaders' known ability to comprehend and meet conflicting demands from both the organization and their followers (Alfes & Langner, 2017). This study makes it clear that, depending on their core self-evaluation traits (generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional stability, and locus of control), different leaders display distinct behavioral tendencies when managing people.

Additionally, social learning theory's vicarious learning concept holds that leaders can influence followers' behavioral outcomes by setting an example (Manz & Sims Jr, 1981). People observe how leaders behave, interpret various behavioral clues, and then replicate those behaviors in their own actions (Maisto, Carey, & Bradizza, 1999).

By embracing paradoxes in the workplace and simultaneously integrating divergent perspectives, paradoxical leaders exhibit seemingly inconsistent, complex, or conflicting behaviors that may cause discomfort or other negative affect among followers. Based on this argument, we propose that paradoxical leaders can foster ambidexterity in their followers by serving as role models (Lavine, 2014). Consequently, the extent to which followers possess the personal capacity to understand and manage such complex and contradictory behaviors is a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of paradoxical leadership behavior (PLB). To mitigate negative affect and enhance productivity when working with paradoxical leaders, it is suggested that followers with a paradox mindset are better equipped to adapt to paradoxical behaviors and interpret paradoxical demands more positively.

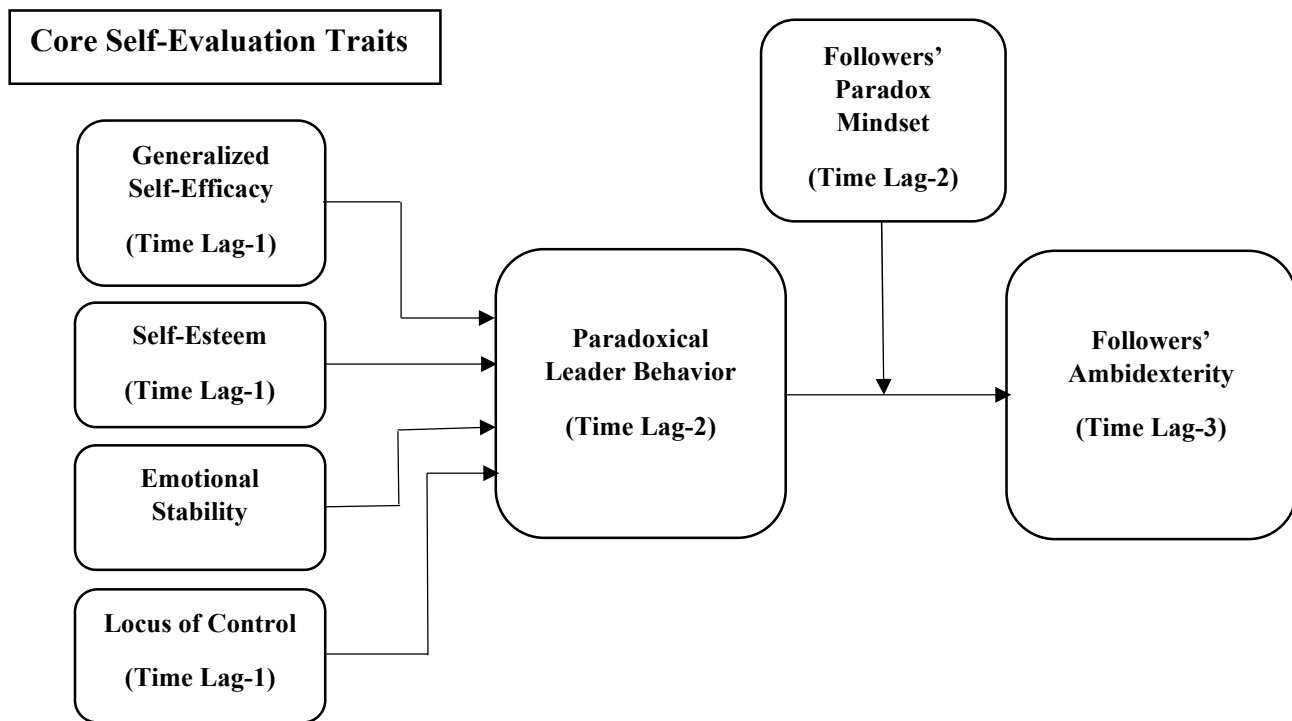


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Sample Size

This study is quantitative as a questionnaire was used for data collection. Data was collected from supervisors and their immediate subordinates working in telecom organizations (operating in cities of Rawalpindi & Islamabad in Pakistan). We used convenience sampling techniques for data collection. This approach may have led to an overrepresentation of certain demographic or organizational characteristics, such as employees from more cooperative teams or supervisors more inclined to participate in surveys. To mitigate these concerns, we ensured heterogeneity in our sample by collecting data from multiple telecom organizations across Rawalpindi and Islamabad, covering a range of departments and job roles.

Data for the supervisors' core self-evaluation traits and demographic variables (Form A-1) was collected from supervisors at time 1. Data for the supervisors' paradoxical behavior (PLB) was

collected from subordinates at time 2 and subordinates were also asked to respond to questions about their own paradox mindset and demographics (Form B). Supervisors were also asked to rate subordinates' ambidexterity (Form A-2) at time 3. While a gap of ten days was given to participants between every time lag. To reduce common method bias, we employed a three-wave time-lagged design, collecting data from different sources (supervisors and subordinates) at separate intervals. A 10-day gap between each phase minimized consistency and recall biases. Additionally, source separation and confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that common method bias was not a major concern.

Sample size adequacy was determined by using G*Power software which was developed by Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, and Lang (2009). Faul et al. (2009) recommended default parameters which are medium effect size (0.15), α level (0.05), & high power (0.95). While the number of predictors was set at 7 (based on our model). The priori power analysis indicated that sample size of 153 will be adequate. A post-hoc analysis was conducted to assess sampling adequacy for 800 respondents. The post hoc power analysis for this sample size yielded a high statistical power of 1.0, well above the recommended threshold of 0.80. A total of 240 Form A-1 questionnaires were distributed, of which 200 were usable. We distributed 700 Form A-2 questionnaires and received 600 complete responses. Additionally, 700 Form B questionnaires were distributed, and 680 were returned. This resulted in a final sample of 600 subordinate surveys nested within responses from 200 immediate supervisors.

3.2 Measures

Considering leader's core self- evaluation traits, self-esteem was measured using 10 item scale developed by Rosenberg (1965); generalized self-efficacy was measured using 8 item scale developed by Judge, Locke, Durham, and Kluger (1998); emotional stability was measured using 12 item scale developed by Costa and McCrae (1992); and locus of control was measured using 8 item scale developed by (Levenson, 1973). Paradoxical leader behavior was measured using a 22 item scale developed by Y. Zhang and Han (2019). Follower's paradox mindset was measured using 9 item scale developed by Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) and lastly followers' ambidexterity was measured with 11 item scale developed by Mom, Van Den Bosch, and Volberda (2007).

4. Analysis and Results

4.1 Demographics of Sample

Here are some key insights of demographics of supervisors and followers. Among the respondents, 68% were male and 32% were female. Most supervisors were aged between 31-35 years (30%), 36-40 years (40%), with only 30% being above 50 years old. In terms of qualifications, supervisors predominantly hold master's degrees (42%) and PhDs (58%). Experience-wise, 66% have 5-10 years of experience, while 39% have been in their roles for 11-15 years. Most employees were aged between 25-30 years (45%) and 31-35 years (32%). They primarily hold bachelor's degrees and have 5-10 years of work experience. We controlled demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and tenure of both leaders and followers to rule out alternative explanations. Big Five personality traits were not controlled to avoid conceptual overlapping with CSE and to preserve its unique explanatory power. Team membership and dyadic tenure were considered but not controlled due to model simplicity and sample constraints.

Chi-square/df for 4-factors models are according to recommended value around 2 (Ullman & Bentler, 2012) to 5 (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). For instance, from Table Chi-square the relationship of CSE-PLB-PM-EA is 3.005.

Other model indices like CFI (Bentler, 1990) comparative fit index ranges between 0 and 1; a score close to 1 indicates that the model is a best fit. (Byrne, 2012). Similarly, TLI (Tucker & Lewis, 1973) Tucker Lewis Index ranges just like 0 to 1 as CFI. MacCallum, Browne, and Sugawara (1996) suggested RSMEA (roots mean square error of approximation) should range between 0.1 to 0.6 (Hu & Bentler, 1998).

Table 1. Measurement Model Fit Indices

		χ^2/DF	CFI	RSMEA	GFI	TLI
2-factors	CSE-EA	5.572	0.860	0.087	0.683	0.835
3-factors	CSE-PLB-EA	4.241	0.855	0.074	0.697	0.839
4-factors	CSE-PLB-PM-EA	3.005	0.901	0.062	0.892	0.915

Note: Leader Core Self-Evaluation Traits (CSE), Paradoxical Leadership Behavior (PLB), Followers' Paradoxical Mindset (PM), Employee Ambidexterity (EA)

From the above Table model-fit indices improved after adding variables like CFI for (CSE-EA) is 0.860, for (CSE-PLB-EA) is 0.855, for (CSE-PLB-PM-EA) is 0.901. Therefore, it is visible that model fit indices are quite satisfactory, in range and the proposed measurement model reflects a vivid picture of the theoretical model.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics & Reliability

	CA	CR	AVE	MSV	Mean	SD
SE	0.912	0.919	0.757	0.593	4.001	.819
GSE	0.858	0.859	0.747	0.611	4.044	.829
LoC	0.879	0.879	0.699	0.603	3.952	.788
ES	0.914	0.915	0.740	0.611	4.019	.795
EA	0.923	0.926	0.723	0.652	4.006	.797
PLB	0.913	0.914	0.627	0.251	4.054	.713
PM	0.918	0.918	0.717	0.355	3.992	.796

Note: Self-Esteem (SE); Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE); Locus of Control (LoC); Emotional Stability (ES); Paradoxical Leadership Behavior (PLB); Paradoxical Mindset (PM); Employee Ambidexterity; Average Variance Extracted (AVE); Maximum shared Variance (MSV); Cronbach Alpha (CA); Composite Reliability (CR); Standard Deviation (SD)

The estimation of convergent and discriminant validity establishes the validity of the measurement model. According to (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) convergent validity is $AVE > 0.05$ and $AVE > MSV$. Thus, the measurement model has convergent validity. Moreover Table shows diagonal components with correlations between all constructs that are less than 0.90, indicating discriminant validity as well (Cheung, Cooper-Thomas, Lau, & Wang, 2023; Shiu, Pervan, Bove, & Beatty, 2011).

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis presents the results of the direct relationships, with the signs indicating the nature and direction of the correlations. Some of the demographic (control) variables have an impact on main constructs. For instance, an employee's age has an influence on followers'

ambidexterity ($r = .15, p < .01$), this implies that ambidexterity of followers increases as followers become aged. Moreover, age upsurges paradoxical mindset in followers ($r = .25, p < .01$). Supervisor/leaders' tenure has a significant impact on his emotional stability trait ($r = .19, p < .01$) and followers' ambidexterity ($r = .17, p < .01$). Employee/ followers tenure positively predicts followers' paradoxical mindset. As for direct effects of predictor variables on criterion variable leaders' CSE traits have been examined against outcome variables and self-esteem was found to have significant effect on followers' ambidexterity ($r = .30, p < .01$). Further, generalized self-efficacy was positively linked with followers' ambidexterity ($r = .35, p < .01$), Locus of control has significant and direct effect on followers' ambidexterity ($r = .18, p < .05$), Emotional Stability was found to be positively associated with followers' ambidexterity ($r = .22, p < .01$). Therefore, H_{3 a}, H_{3 b}, H_{3 c}, H_{3 d} were supported.

Similarly, self-esteem is positively associated with paradoxical leadership behavior ($r = .39, p < .05$). Generalized Self-Efficacy was also positively associated with paradoxical leadership behavior ($r = .22, p < .01$). Locus of Control and emotional stability was directly correlated with paradoxical leadership behavior ($r = .31, p < .01$) and ($r = .32, p < .01$). Thus, H_{1 a}, H_{1 b}, H_{1 c}, H_{1 d} were accepted. Paradoxical leader behavior has been found to have a direct and significant relationship with followers' ambidexterity ($r = .29, p < .01$) that established H₂.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

Table 3 demonstrated that Self-esteem has been found to have significant indirect effect on followers' ambidexterity [$r = 0.266, p < .05$; 95% CI (0.156, 0.305)], generalized self-efficacy has significant indirect effect on followers' ambidexterity [$r = 0.228, p < .05$; 95% CI (0.155, 0.307)].

Table 3. Mediation Analysis

Indirect Effects	Employee Ambidexterity: Outcome		
	β	LLCI	ULCI
SE –PLB (Total)	0.525 *	0.397	0.630
Direct	0.299 *	0.180	0.425
Indirect	0.226*	0.156	0.305
GSE—PLB (Total)	0.607*	0.484	0.748
Direct	0.379 *	0.247	0.526
Indirect	0.228*	0.155	0.307
LoC—PLB	0.552*	0.425	0.664
Direct	0.345*	0.228	0.460
Indirect	0.207*	0.140	0.277
ES—PLB	0.445*	0.310	0.585
Direct	0.162*	0.018	0.321
Indirect	0.283*	0.184	0.392

Note: Self-Esteem (SE); Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE); Locus of Control (LoC); Emotional Stability (ES); Paradoxical Leadership Behavior (PLB); Lower Limit Confidence Interval (LLCI); Upper Limit Confidence Interval (ULCI)

Furthermore, Locus of control has significant indirect effect on followers' ambidexterity [$r = 0.207, p < .05$; 95% CI (0.140, 0.277)] and emotional stability has significant indirect effect on followers' ambidexterity [$r = 0.283, p < .05$; 95% CI (0.184, 0.392)]. Both direct and indirect effects are significant for all leaders' CSE traits so paradoxical leader behavior partially mediates the

relationship between self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, emotional stability with followers' ambidexterity.

4.4 Moderating Effects of Employee's Paradoxical Mindset

Moderation analysis is used to assess the strength of relationship between predictor and criterion variables in presence of moderator variables. Here leaders' paradoxical behavior and followers' outcomes are strengthened in presence of followers' paradoxical mindset.

Table 4. Moderating Effects of Paradoxical Mindset

Constructs		β	p	t
Paradoxical leader Behavior		0.418	0.000	5.270
Paradox Mindset		0.445	0.000	7.603
PLB x PM		0.562	0.000	10.576
Conditional Effects of Focal Predictors at Level of Moderator (PM)				
		γ	LLCI	ULCI
SE	Low	0.044	-0.121	0.051
	High	0.321*	0.216	0.426
GSE	Low	-0.011	-0.052	0.043
	High	0.116*	0.058	0.201
LoC	Low	-0.022	-0.108	0.064
	High	0.321*	0.216	0.457
ES	Low	-0.012	-0.056	0.040
	High	0.127*	0.063	0.218

Note: Self-Esteem (SE); Generalized Self-Efficacy (GSE); Locus of Control (LoC); Emotional Stability (ES); Paradoxical Leadership Behavior (PLB); Paradoxical Mindset (PM); Outcome variable Employee Ambidexterity (EA);

In line to our expectations, followers' paradoxical mindset strengthened the relationship between paradoxical leader behavior and followers' ambidexterity ($\beta = 0.562$, $p < .001$) therefore H_5 has accepted.

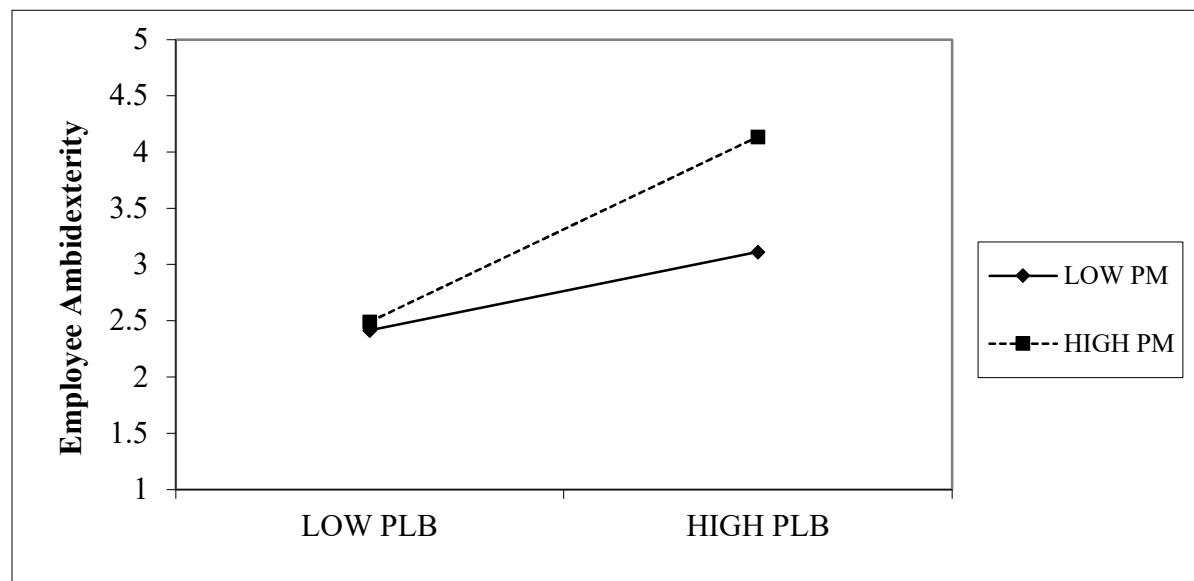


Figure 2. Interaction of paradoxical leader behavior (PLB) and followers' paradoxical mindset on followers' ambidexterity

Conditional indirect effects of self-esteem on followers' ambidexterity at low and high level of paradoxical mindset have shown, both ($\gamma=0.044$, $p > 0.05$) and [$\gamma=0.321$, $p < .05$] are different to each other which support our hypothesis. Conditional indirect effects of generalized self-efficacy on followers' ambidexterity at low of paradoxical mindset [$\gamma=-0.011$, $p > 0.05$; 95% CI (-0.0521 0.043)] is insignificant and significant at high level of paradoxical mindset ($\gamma=0.116^*$, $p < .05$). Further, conditional indirect effect of locus of control for followers' ambidexterity was insignificant at low levels of followers' paradoxical mindset ($\gamma = -0.022$, $p > 0.05$) but was significant at high levels of followers' paradoxical mindset ($\gamma = 0.321^*$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, Conditional indirect effect of emotional stability for followers' ambidexterity was insignificant at low levels of followers' paradoxical mindset ($\gamma = -0.030$, $p > 0.05$) also was significant at high levels of followers' paradoxical mindset ($\gamma = 0.315^*$, $p < 0.05$). Hence hypothesis H₆ (a), H₆ (b), H₆ (c), H₆ (d) were supported.

5. Discussion

Integrating trait theory, social learning theory, and the paradox perspective as our theoretical framework, we proposed how leaders' core self-evaluation traits influence paradoxical leader behavior in managing people and the ambidexterity of their followers. Our empirical findings suggest that leader core self-evaluation traits positively impact follower ambidexterity through paradoxical leader behavior. The results further show that followers' paradox mindset strengthens this effect.

Consistent with Y. Zhang et al. (2015) and Miron-Spektor et al. (2018), our findings confirm that PLB significantly enhances followers' ambidexterity, reinforcing the idea that paradoxical leadership is well-suited for environments requiring simultaneous exploration and exploitation. This study adds to that body of work by identifying leader-level CSE traits as critical predictors of PLB, an area that has received limited attention. Previous research has explored other antecedents of PLB, such as integrative thinking (Y. Zhang et al., 2015) or organizational structure (Ishaq et al., 2021), but few have considered personality traits, especially beyond the Big Five. Our results align with (Bono & Judge, 2003a) argument that CSE offers stronger predictive utility for performance-related outcomes due to its evaluative and motivational core.

The positive relationship found between CSE traits and PLB contrasts with the limited or mixed effects of certain Big Five traits (e.g., conscientiousness or agreeableness) reported in earlier studies e.g., Ishaq et al. (2021). This suggests that leaders' self-perceptions of control, efficacy, and emotional stability may be more central to engaging in complex behaviors like PLB than broader dispositional tendencies. Furthermore, our finding that followers' paradox mindset moderates the relationship between PLB and ambidexterity supports and extends prior work by Miron-Spektor et al. (2018), who showed that individuals with a higher paradox mindset are more capable of navigating tension-laden demands. Our study adds to this by confirming this effect in the context of leader-follower dynamics, highlighting that not only do paradoxical leaders matter, but the receptivity of followers to those behaviors is equally important. However, unlike some prior studies that emphasized the direct effect of leader behavior on outcomes e.g., Y. Y. Chang, Hu, Hughes, Chang, and Chang (2024), our findings underscore the mediating role of PLB between CSE traits and follower ambidexterity, adding a more nuanced, multistep process perspective to the leadership-ambidexterity linkage.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

Our findings contribute to literature on paradoxical leader behavior, ambidexterity and CSE traits in several ways: First, considering social learning theory we have determined that PLB serves as a driving force to help individuals deal with paradoxical demands of ambidexterity. Emerging research has identified the paradoxical nature of ambidexterity, describing that leaders play a critical role in fostering ambidexterity among individuals. However, our understanding of how leaders tackle the paradoxical demands of ambidexterity is still quite limited. Prior studies demonstrated that individuals either focused on exploration or exploitation activities (Adner & Levinthal, 2008; Un, 2007). Through integrating social learning theory, we discussed how paradoxical leadership will foster ambidexterity.

Second, this study extends trait theory as it suggests that personality traits distally influences followers ambidexterity through leadership behavior. This theory does not explain leadership behaviors. This study discusses which leadership behaviors can enhance ambidexterity and when. Specifically, it describes that leaders with CSE traits can foster followers ambidexterity through adopting “both-and” strategy. Our results indicated that leaders’ core self-evaluation traits (self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability, and internal locus of control) were positively associated with paradoxical leader behavior (PLB) in people management. In summary, leaders who perceive themselves as valuable, have confidence in their abilities, effectively manage work-related stress, and believe they have control over their environment are more likely to engage in paradoxical leader behavior, as they are better equipped to handle conflicting demands. Such leaders then played a crucial role in fostering ambidexterity among the followers.

Third, results of this study regarding moderating effect of followers’ dispositional traits i-e paradox mindset increase our understanding that follower paradox mindset helps them deal with the behavioral intricacy of paradoxical leaders and also fosters ambidexterity. Our findings support the notion that leaders’ behaviors and followers’ characteristics may jointly have a differential impact over different performance outcomes (Raub & Robert, 2010).

5.3 Practical Implications

This study offers several actionable recommendations for human resource management, leadership development, and organizational practice, particularly within the context of knowledge-intensive sectors like telecom in Pakistan: First, organizations should consider integrating CSE-based assessments into their leader selection and promotion systems. Traits such as high self-efficacy, emotional stability, and internal locus of control equip leaders to tolerate ambiguity and navigate contradictory demands which are core requirements for leading in dynamic environments. Psychometric tools and behavioral interviews can be adapted to assess these traits in recruitment and succession planning processes.

Second, leadership training programs should explicitly include modules on paradox management and “both-and” thinking, encouraging leaders to develop behaviors that embrace, not avoid tensions such as stability versus change or autonomy versus structure. Such training can be contextually customized to telecom organizations in Pakistan, where rapid technological shifts, customer pressure, and resource constraints create a need for leaders who can hold competing priorities in balance. Third, because the effectiveness of PLB is influenced by followers’ paradox mindset, organizations should consider investing in follower development interventions—including coaching, mindset workshops, or reflective learning practices—that build comfort with ambiguity, tension, and complexity. These interventions can help employees better interpret and benefit from paradoxical leadership, thereby amplifying its positive effects.

Fourth, sector-specific HR policies should reflect the paradoxical nature of roles in telecom firms, where employees must simultaneously deliver efficient service (exploitation) and adapt to changing technologies and customer needs (exploration). Performance evaluation systems should recognize and reward ambidextrous behaviors rather than focusing solely on short-term efficiency or innovation, thereby aligning organizational culture with individual ambidexterity goals. In summary, this study underscores the importance of holistic talent management, not only selecting leaders with the right traits but also shaping the organizational environment and follower mindsets to support paradoxical leadership and ambidextrous performance.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Recommendation

First limitation is in the design of study as leaders were asked to rate followers' ambidexterity instead of measuring it objectively. We could not measure it objectively as we collected data from different companies operating in the telecom sector and each of them had different ways of engaging in ambidexterity. Second, we conducted survey analysis in three time lags. Future research can consider longitudinal design to extend findings of this study. Third, our study was conducted within the telecom sector in Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research should explore more diverse industry and cultural contexts to examine whether the effects of paradoxical leadership hold across different organizational environments. Lastly, our study examined antecedents and outcomes of PLB. Paradoxical leader behavior is often criticized by followers who struggle to connect with leaders exhibiting these traits. Considering the behavioral complexity of paradoxical leader behaviors, it is recommended that future researchers explore factors that help followers embrace these behaviors, such as ambiguity tolerance and psychological resilience.

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