

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF AMBIDEXTROUS LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: *Based on the existing literature, this article provides a comprehensive understanding of the idea of an ambidextrous organization and ambidextrous leadership as a revolutionary and novel leadership approach. Such an understanding is highly relevant in today's business environment, which is increasingly characterized by disruptive technological changes, market volatility, and the acceleration of global competition (Kafetzopoulos, 2022; Kraft, 2018; Wang et al., 2022). In fact, ambidextrous leadership is suggested as a way to achieve organizational ambidexterity and thus builds the focal point of interest. Ambidextrous leadership is distinct from other leadership styles in its ability to integrate two distinctive, yet complementary behavioral poles, namely opening leader behaviors and closing leader behaviors.*

Keywords: *Ambidextrous leadership, opening and closing leader behaviors, ambidextrous organization, innovative performance*

INTRODUCTION

Today's business environment is characterized by rapid changes, global competition, and high market volatility (Kraft, 2018; Wang et al., 2022; Zarb et al., 2017). Organizations need to combine short-term goal achievement with long-term thinking (Kassotaki, 2019). Leadership builds the core element of any organizational functioning and substantially impacts employee behavior (Dinibutun, 2020). Over the last years, scholars have argued that a single behavioral leadership focus is no longer able to meet the needs of the contemporary business environment that is increasingly characterized by change, complexity, and contradiction (Peng, 2020; Rosing et al., 2011). This led to the idea of ambidextrous leadership (Rosing et al., 2011).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the existing psychology and management literature, the author aims to provide a compact and thorough overview of the concept of an ambidextrous organization and ambidextrous leadership as a crucial approach to achieving such organizational ambidexterity. The literature research mainly built on papers from academic journals, most of which are peer-reviewed. The author accessed them through electronic scientific databases (e.g., Google Scholar, PsychInfo) by inserting different combinations of keywords related to the topics of interest. For this publication, only the main content points are presented. For a comprehensive overview, refer to my dissertation.

RESULTS

Ambidextrous Organization

Originally, the term “ambidexterity” was not specifically related to leadership but to the macro level, or to say it differently, to the organization as a whole (Rosing et al., 2011). Specifically, Duncan (1976) was the first to introduce the concept of ambidexterity into the scientific domain of strategic management and organizational studies. The idea of ambidexterity on the organizational level referred to the ability of an organization to effectively manage their day-to-day business while adequately adapting to new demands (Wu et al., 2020). At that point, neither the distinction between exploration and exploitation nor leadership issues were subjects of discussion.

In fact, it was March (1991) who coined the terms “exploration” and “exploitation”. He used these terms in the context of organizational learning and conceptualized them as two independent activities in the learning process of an organization (March, 1991). Through his introduction of these two contrary activities, he made an important contribution to today’s conceptualization of organizational ambidexterity.

However, it was not until Tushman and O’Reilly (1996) that the term “ambidextrous organization”, conceptualized as an organization that balances both exploration and exploitation activities, was finally established. In fact, Tushman and O’Reilly (1996) used the ideas of Duncan (1976) and March (1991) and integrated them into one concept and explained its relevance for dynamic environments. In essence, an ambidextrous organization is an organization that engages in both exploration and exploitation, either at the same time or consecutively (Keller & Weibler, 2015).

On the one hand, an ambidextrous organization exploits its current resources such as existing knowledge and competencies (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016). This enables the organization to enhance its efficiency and stability (Mueller et al., 2018). On the other hand, the organization also looks for new opportunities and future changes (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016). This can be done through exploring and testing new ways of doing things (Mueller et al., 2018; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). It is thereby crucial that an ambidextrous organization manages to find a balance between its explorative and exploitative activities (Zacher & Rosing, 2015). It is exactly this balance of exploration and exploitation that makes the organization most capable of pursuing both short-term and long-term goals (Keller & Weibler, 2015; Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996).

A Leadership Challenge

While scholars have agreed that organizations should become ambidextrous to successfully meet the demands of today’s work landscape, *how* organizations achieve this aim often remains unclear (Kassotaki, 2022). In the literature, organizational ambidexterity is often described and measured, but at the same time, one may critically ask where this ambidexterity actually comes from. What makes organi-

zational members (e.g., employees) act ambidextrously (i.e., engage in exploration and exploitation)? How is ambidexterity on the macro (i.e., firm) level related to ambidexterity on the micro (i.e., individual) level (Keller & Weibler, 2015; Rosing et al., 2011)?

This is where leadership comes in. The role of leaders in organizations is crucial (Dinibutun, 2020). Leaders do not only set the overall organizational strategy, but also navigate employees' behaviors to ensure they meet the organizational aims (Day & Antonakis, 2012). Thus, leadership is the most important antecedent of organizational ambidexterity (Kassotaki, 2019; Keller & Weibler, 2015). If leaders manage to adapt their leadership behavior so that it fits the opposing ideas of exploration and exploitation, they will be able to initiate ambidextrous behavior in employees (Kassotaki, 2019). This, in turn, will cultivate organizational ambidexterity (Kafetzopoulos, 2022; Mueller et al., 2018). Or like Probst et al. (2011) said it, "becoming ambidextrous is first and foremost a leadership challenge" (p. 326).

Ambidextrous Leadership

The classic conceptualization of ambidextrous leadership is based on the work by Rosing et al. (2011). It suggests that ambidextrous leadership is characterized by two aspects. First, ambidextrous leadership is defined as the interaction of "two distinct, yet complementary" leader behaviors (Kafetzopoulos, 2022, p. 220), namely opening leader behaviors (initiating employee exploration) and closing leader behaviors (initiating employee exploitation; Rosing et al., 2011; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). Second, ambidextrous leadership requires the leader to show temporal flexibility and consequently decide which leader behavior is more appropriate in the specific situation (Rosing et al., 2011).

The term ambidexterity stems from the Latin words "ambos", which means "both", and "dexter", which means "right", and literally refers to the human ability to use both hands equally well (Zacher et al., 2016; Zacher & Rosing, 2015; Zarb et al., 2017). To illustrate ambidextrous leadership, one can make use of the hand metaphor: Ambidextrous leaders hold opening leader behaviors in the one (e.g., right) and closing leader behaviors in the other (e.g., left) hand. They are able to switch between both hands at any time and can use them equally well, just like an ambidextrous person has equal skills of both hands when it comes to writing (Rosing et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2021).

Opening Leader Behaviors

Opening leader behaviors aim to increase the variance of employee behaviors and initiate employees' explorative behaviors (Rosing et al., 2011; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). Typical opening leader behaviors are motivating employees to leave routines behind and approach things differently, think and act independently, and challenge the status quo within the organization (Rosing et al., 2011). Also, the leader encourages employees to experiment and discover new ways of completing a task, and the leader also tolerates errors (Kafetzopoulos, 2022; Rosing et al., 2011). Table 1 sums

up seven examples for opening leader behaviors presented by Rosing et al. (2011) in their classic conceptualization of ambidextrous leadership.

Table 1. Examples of Opening Leader Behaviors (Rosing et al., 2011)

Opening leader behaviors	
(1)	Allowing different ways of accomplishing a task
(2)	Encouraging experimentation with different ideas
(3)	Motivating to take risks
(4)	Giving possibilities for independent thinking and acting
(5)	Giving room for own ideas
(6)	Allowing errors
(7)	Encouraging error learning

Closing Leader Behaviors

In contrast, closing leader behaviors intend to decrease the variance of employee behaviors and initiate employees' exploitative behaviors (Rosing et al., 2011; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). Typical closing leader behaviors are demanding uniform task completion, focusing on measurable goals, and paying attention to employees' adherence to established routines and formalized rules (Rosing et al., 2011). Also, the leader takes corrective actions, monitors employees' goal attainment, and sanctions errors (Kafetzopoulos, 2022; Kraft, 2018; Rosing et al., 2011). Table 2 summarizes seven examples for closing leader behaviors as delivered by Rosing et al. (2011) in their classic conceptualization of ambidextrous leadership.

Table 2. Examples of Closing Leader Behaviors (Rosing et al., 2011)

Closing leader behaviors	
(1)	Monitoring and controlling goal attainment
(2)	Establishing routines
(3)	Taking corrective actions
(4)	Controlling adherence to rules
(5)	Paying attention to uniform task accomplishment
(6)	Sanctioning errors
(7)	Sticking to plans

Employee Behavior

It is important to understand the interconnectedness of leader and employee behavior in the definition of ambidextrous leadership (Klonek et al., 2023; Rosing & Zacher, 2023; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). Ambidextrous leadership always means that a) the leader behaves in certain ways, and b) employees react in corresponding ways (Zacher & Rosing, 2015). In other words, a) only exists together with b). When the leader engages in opening leader behaviors, this automatically means that employees’ behavioral variability is increased and that they engage in exploration (Kafetzopoulos, 2022; Klonek et al., 2023; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). Likewise, when the leader executes closing leader behaviors, this automatically indicates that employees’ behavioral variability is decreased and that they engage in exploitation (Kafetzopoulos, 2022; Rosing et al., 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the leader–employee dynamics of ambidextrous leadership as suggested by the classic definition.

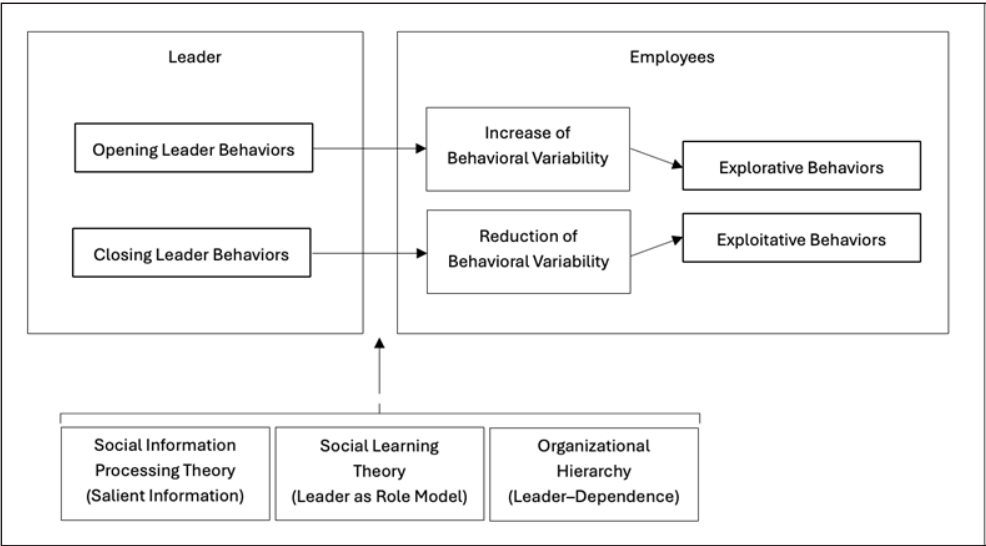


Fig. 1. Leader – Employee Dynamics of Ambidextrous Leadership

CONCLUSION

Leadership is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). The more complex the business environment becomes, the more flexible leadership needs to be. As ambidextrous leadership is distinct from other leadership styles in its ability to integrate two distinctive, yet complementary behavioral poles, both in leaders and employees (Kafetzopoulos, 2022), it is a promising leadership concept for the present and future.

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КЪМ РАЗБИРАНЕТО НА АМБИДЕКСТРАЛНОТО ЛИДЕРСТВО

Резюме: Въз основа на съществуващата литература тази статия предоставя цялостно разбиране на идеята за амбидекстрална организация и амбидекстрално лидерство като революционен и нов лидерски подход. Подобно разбиране е изключително актуално в днешната бизнес среда, която все повече се характеризира с разрушителни технологични промени, нестабилност на пазара и ускоряване на глобалната конкуренция (Kafetzoroulos, 2022; Kraft, 2018; Wang et al., 2022). Всъщност амбидекстралното лидерство се предлага като начин за постигане на организационна амбидекстралност и по този начин изгражда фокуса на интереса. Амбидекстралното лидерство се отличава от другите лидерски стилове по способността си да интегрира два различни, но допълващи се поведенчески полюса, а именно отварящо и затварящо лидерско поведение. Тази статия не само представя подробно амбидекстралното лидерство (например класическа концептуализация, поведение на служителите, иновативно представяне), но и обсъжда някои изследователски пропуски в литературата за амбидекстралното лидерство, които изискват научно внимание.

Ключови думи: амбидекстрално лидерство; отварящо и затварящо лидерско поведение; амбидекстрално организиране; иновативно представяне

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