



ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE CREATIVITY: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPLOYEE AMBIDEXTERITY IN FOOD AND BEVERAGE MANUFACTURING FIRMS A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Organisations in the food and beverage manufacturing sector face a persistent exploration-exploitation tension: employees are expected to generate novel ideas while simultaneously operating under strict requirements for standardisation, product consistency, food safety, regulatory compliance, and operational efficiency. This conceptual paper addresses the theoretically under-specified question of how entrepreneurial leaders enable employees to navigate these simultaneous demands and thereby produce creative outcomes. Drawing on Dynamic Capability Theory, ambidexterity theory and the componential model of creativity, the paper theorises employee ambidexterity, defined as the behavioural capacity to engage in both exploratory and exploitative activities at high levels (combined ambidexterity), as the central mediating mechanism. Entrepreneurial leadership is argued to shape organisational sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring processes that create the micro-foundational conditions (autonomy, dual-goal framing, psychological safety, and learning orientation) under which employees can develop and enact ambidextrous behaviours. These behaviours, in turn, generate ideas that are both novel (via exploration) and useful (via exploitation). The paper differentiates entrepreneurial leadership from ambidextrous leadership, clarifies the cross-level theoretical chain, situates the argument in the distinctive context of food and beverage manufacturing, and advances four testable propositions. Theoretical contributions, practical implications and limitations are discussed.

1. Introduction

A central challenge confronting contemporary organisations is the need to pursue exploration and exploitation simultaneously. Exploration involves search, variation, experimentation and the pursuit of novel opportunities, while exploitation involves refinement, efficiency, implementation and the leveraging of existing knowledge (March, 1991). The tension between these two orientations is especially acute in

manufacturing environments, where the generation of novel and useful ideas must coexist with rigorous demands for process reliability, product standardisation, quality control and regulatory compliance (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Jansen et al., 2009).

In the food and beverage manufacturing sector this tension acquires particular intensity. Employees are routinely required to experiment with new product formulations, packaging solutions, process improvements and responses to shifting dietary preferences, while at the same time operating under non-negotiable constraints of food safety, hygienic standards, batch consistency, waste reduction and increasingly stringent regulatory frameworks (Shafique et al., 2021). Creative performance in this setting therefore cannot be reduced to the generation of novel ideas alone; the ideas must also be refined, feasible and organisationally useful under conditions of high operational constraint. How leadership enables employees to navigate these dual demands remains theoretically under-specified.

Entrepreneurial leadership, defined as a leadership approach that combines opportunity recognition and exploitation with the influence processes of leadership (Gupta et al., 2004; Renko et al., 2015), has been shown to be positively associated with employee creativity (Cai et al., 2019; Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Mehmood et al., 2021). Yet the majority of existing studies have examined direct effects, leaving the behavioural mechanisms that transmit leadership influence relatively opaque. One promising mechanism is employee ambidexterity: the individual capacity to engage in both exploratory and exploitative activities (Mom et al., 2009; Caniëls & Veld, 2019; Rosing et al., 2011). Employees who successfully integrate high levels of both exploration and exploitation are theoretically better positioned to generate ideas that meet the dual criteria of novelty and usefulness that define creativity (Amabile, 1996; Amabile & Pratt, 2016).

This paper therefore reframes the entrepreneurial leadership–creativity relationship around a theoretically meaningful problem: how entrepreneurial leaders enable employees to navigate simultaneous demands for exploration and exploitation, particularly in manufacturing contexts where creativity must coexist with standardisation, reliability, efficiency and safety. Anchored in Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007) and informed by ambidexterity theory and the componential model of creativity, the paper proposes that entrepreneurial leadership enhances employee creativity primarily by cultivating employee ambidexterity. Entrepreneurial leaders function as architects of organisational sensing, seizing and reconfiguring processes; at the individual level these processes are enacted through employees' ambidextrous behaviours, which in turn produce novel and useful ideas.

The paper makes four interrelated contributions. First, it advances employee ambidexterity as a theoretically grounded mediating mechanism that explains how entrepreneurial leadership translates into creative performance under exploration–exploitation tension. Second, it integrates Dynamic Capability Theory across organisational and individual levels, clarifying the micro-foundational chain through which strategic leadership capabilities shape employee behaviour. Third, it differentiates entrepreneurial leadership from ambidextrous leadership (Rosing et al., 2011), thereby establishing the distinctive contribution of the proposed framework. Fourth, it situates the argument in the under-researched yet theoretically consequential context of food and beverage manufacturing, where the dual demands of novelty and operational discipline are especially pronounced.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and articulates the multi-theoretical foundation. Section 3 identifies the research gap, presents the conceptual framework and advances four research propositions. Section 4 discusses theoretical contributions and practical implications. Section 5 outlines limitations and directions for future research. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Entrepreneurial Leadership

Entrepreneurial leadership integrates the opportunity-focused mindset of entrepreneurship with the influence and motivational processes of leadership (Gupta et al., 2004; Renko et al., 2015; Leitch & Volery, 2017). Core behavioural dimensions include opportunity recognition and exploitation, proactiveness, innovativeness, calculated risk-taking and the empowerment of followers to act entrepreneurially (Bagheri & Harrison, 2020; Newman et al., 2018). Entrepreneurial leaders articulate compelling visions, model opportunity-seeking behaviour, create climates of psychological safety and autonomy, and channel employees' efforts toward organisationally relevant problems (Cai et al., 2019; Mehmood et al., 2021).

Empirical research has linked entrepreneurial leadership to firm performance, organisational learning, innovation and employee innovative behaviour (Fontana & Musa, 2017; Cai et al., 2019; Mehmood et al., 2021). However, the bulk of this work has treated the leadership–creativity relationship as largely direct, leaving the intervening behavioural processes under-examined. This omission is theoretically consequential because leadership rarely produces creative outcomes in a simple, linear fashion; rather, leaders shape the psychological and behavioural conditions under which employees develop the dual capacities necessary for creative performance under tension (Rosing et al., 2011).

2.2 Employee Creativity

Employee creativity is defined as the generation of novel and potentially useful ideas concerning products, services, processes or procedures (Amabile, 1996; Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Contemporary models emphasise that creativity emerges from the interaction of domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes and intrinsic motivation within a supportive social environment (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). Critically, the dual criteria of novelty and usefulness imply that pure exploration is insufficient: ideas must also be refined, feasible and organisationally applicable. Exploitation—refinement of existing knowledge, incremental improvement and practical implementation therefore contributes directly to the usefulness dimension of creativity rather than solely to later-stage innovation implementation or operational performance (Amabile, 1996; Caniëls & Veld, 2019).

This clarification is essential. Exploitation is not merely an implementation activity that follows creativity; it is constitutive of the creative outcome itself. Employees who engage in exploitative behaviours are better able to evaluate the practical viability of novel ideas, refine them against organisational constraints (safety, efficiency, regulatory requirements) and ensure that the resulting ideas meet the usefulness criterion. In this sense, the integration of exploration and exploitation is theoretically necessary for creativity, not merely for subsequent innovation performance.

2.3 Employee Ambidexterity: Conceptual Clarification

Ambidexterity at the organisational level refers to the capacity to pursue exploration and exploitation simultaneously (March, 1991; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Jansen et al., 2009). Scholars have extended the construct to the individual level. Employee ambidexterity denotes an individual's ability to engage in both exploratory and exploitative activities (Mom et al., 2009; Caniëls & Veld, 2019; Rosing et al., 2011). Because employee ambidexterity is the proposed mediator, its conceptualisation must be precise.

Several distinctions are relevant:

Simultaneous versus sequential ambidexterity. Simultaneous ambidexterity involves engaging in exploration and exploitation within the same time period; sequential ambidexterity involves temporal switching between the two. Both forms are theoretically viable at the individual level (Mom et al., 2009).

Balanced versus combined ambidexterity. Balanced ambidexterity emphasises relative equality of exploration and exploitation; combined ambidexterity emphasises high absolute levels of both (Caniëls & Veld, 2019). Combined ambidexterity is theoretically more consistent with creativity because it maximises both novelty (high exploration) and usefulness (high exploitation).

Individual versus organisational/contextual ambidexterity. Organisational ambidexterity may be achieved through structural separation or contextual mechanisms; individual ambidexterity resides in the behavioural repertoire of the employee (Mom et al., 2009).

Behavioural versus cognitive or motivational forms. This paper adopts a behavioural conceptualisation: employee ambidexterity is the enacted capacity to perform exploratory behaviours (seeking new knowledge, experimenting, challenging assumptions) and exploitative behaviours (refining routines, leveraging expertise, implementing incremental improvements) at high levels.

Accordingly, the paper adopts a combined, behavioural conceptualisation of employee ambidexterity that encompasses both simultaneous and sequential enactment. This conceptualisation is theoretically appropriate for the proposed mediation model because it positions ambidexterity as an observable behavioural capability that can be shaped by leadership and that directly contributes to the dual criteria of creativity.

2.4 Dynamic Capability Theory and the Cross-Level Argument

Dynamic Capability Theory (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007; Wang & Ahmed, 2007) provides the overarching theoretical lens. The theory posits that sustainable competitive advantage arises from an organisation's ability to sense opportunities and threats, seize those opportunities, and continuously reconfigure tangible and intangible assets. While originally formulated at the organisational level, the micro-foundations of dynamic capabilities reside in individual and group behaviours (Teece, 2007; Felin et al., 2012).

Within this perspective, entrepreneurial leadership can be viewed as a strategic capability that shapes the sensing, seizing and reconfiguring processes of the organisation. Entrepreneurial leaders scan the environment for opportunities (sensing), mobilise resources and commitment around those opportunities (seizing), and foster the organisational flexibility required for continuous adaptation (reconfiguring). At the individual level, employee ambidexterity constitutes a micro-level dynamic capability: exploratory behaviours correspond to sensing and seizing new knowledge, while exploitative behaviours correspond to the efficient reconfiguration and application of existing knowledge.

The cross-level mechanism is therefore specified as follows. Entrepreneurial leadership shapes organisational-level sensing, seizing and reconfiguring processes. These processes create enabling conditions: dual-goal framing (exploration and exploitation are both valued), autonomy, psychological safety, cross-functional collaboration and constructive tolerance of calculated failure that allow employees to develop and enact ambidextrous behaviours. Employees' exploratory and exploitative behaviours, when integrated at high levels, generate ideas that are both novel and useful. Creativity thus emerges as the individual-level outcome of organisational dynamic capabilities enacted through micro-foundational ambidextrous behaviours.

2.5 Differentiating Entrepreneurial Leadership from Ambidextrous Leadership

Ambidextrous leadership theory (Rosing et al., 2011) proposes that leaders foster innovation by temporally switching between opening behaviours (encouraging experimentation, autonomy and variation) and closing behaviours (establishing routines, monitoring and enforcing standards). Opening behaviours facilitate exploration; closing behaviours facilitate exploitation. The theory has received substantial empirical support and is explicitly designed to address the exploration–exploitation tension (Zacher & Rosing, 2015; Zacher et al., 2016).

Entrepreneurial leadership is related to, yet distinct from, ambidextrous leadership. While both approaches recognise the dual demands of exploration and exploitation, they differ in theoretical origin, behavioural emphasis and scope. Ambidextrous leadership is grounded in the innovation process and focuses on the temporal flexibility of opening and closing behaviours. Entrepreneurial leadership is grounded in the entrepreneurship literature and emphasises opportunity recognition, opportunity exploitation, proactiveness, calculated risk-taking and the creation of an entrepreneurial climate that empowers followers to act entrepreneurially (Gupta et al., 2004; Renko et al., 2015). Entrepreneurial leaders do not merely switch between opening and closing; they create a broader opportunity-oriented context in which employees are encouraged to identify and pursue novel opportunities while refining them against organisational realities. This distinction establishes the novelty of the proposed framework: entrepreneurial leadership supplies a theoretically distinct pathway rooted in opportunity recognition and entrepreneurial empowerment through which employee ambidexterity and subsequent creativity are fostered.

3. Research Gap, Conceptual Framework and Propositions

3.1 Research Gap

Despite expanding literatures on entrepreneurial leadership, employee creativity and ambidexterity, a central theoretical gap persists. Existing research has not adequately explained how employees navigate the exploration–exploitation tension when entrepreneurial leadership is translated into creative outcomes. Prior studies have predominantly tested direct relationships between entrepreneurial leadership and creativity (Cai et al., 2019; Mehmood et al., 2021), offering limited insight into the behavioural mechanisms that transmit leadership influence under dual demands. Although ambidextrous leadership theory addresses the exploration–exploitation tension (Rosing et al., 2011), the specific role of employee ambidexterity as a mediator between entrepreneurial leadership and individual creativity remains largely unexplored. Moreover, alternative mediators such as creative self-efficacy (Cai et al., 2019) capture employees' beliefs about their creative capacity rather than the behavioural integration of exploration and exploitation. Employee ambidexterity is theoretically complementary and, in contexts characterised by strong operational constraints, potentially more proximal to the dual criteria of creativity.

The food and beverage manufacturing context intensifies this theoretical problem. The sector's simultaneous requirements for experimentation (new products, processes, responses to consumer preferences) and rigorous operational discipline (safety, consistency, regulatory compliance) generate a distinctive exploration–exploitation tension that makes employee ambidexterity particularly consequential. By theorising employee ambidexterity as the mechanism through which entrepreneurial leadership enables employees to navigate this tension, the paper addresses a theoretically meaningful and contextually grounded gap.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework posits that entrepreneurial leadership exerts both a direct effect on employee creativity and an indirect effect through employee ambidexterity. Entrepreneurial leaders create enabling conditions—autonomy, dual-goal framing, psychological safety, learning orientation and support for calculated risk-taking—that allow employees to engage in high levels of both exploratory and exploitative activities. The successful integration of these dual activities enhances employees’ capacity to generate novel and useful ideas.

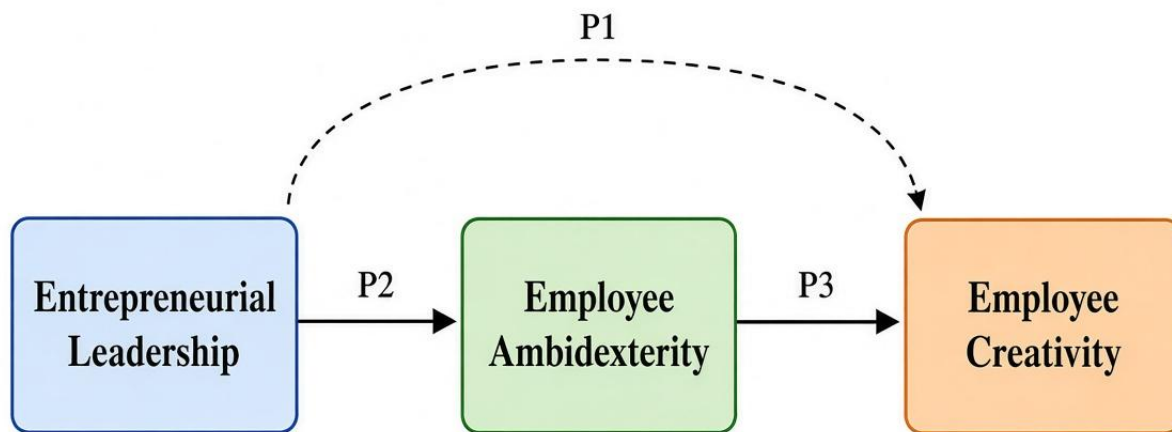
Figure 1

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Entrepreneurial Leadership → Employee Ambidexterity → Employee Creativity

(Direct path: Entrepreneurial Leadership → Employee Creativity)

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework



P4: Employee Ambidexterity mediates the relationship between Entrepreneurial Leadership and Employee Creativity.

Source: Authors’ conceptualisation.

3.3 Research Propositions

Building on the preceding theoretical arguments, the following propositions are advanced:

Proposition 1 (P1): Entrepreneurial leadership positively influences employee creativity.

Entrepreneurial leaders stimulate creativity by articulating an opportunity-oriented vision, modelling opportunity-seeking behaviour, empowering employees and creating climates of psychological safety and experimentation (Gupta et al., 2004; Cai et al., 2019; Bagheri & Harrison, 2020).

Proposition 2 (P2): Entrepreneurial leadership positively influences employee ambidexterity.

By encouraging continuous learning, granting autonomy, supporting cross-functional collaboration, framing dual goals of exploration and exploitation, and tolerating calculated failure, entrepreneurial leaders enable employees to engage in high levels of both exploratory and exploitative activities (Rosing et al., 2011; Caniëls & Veld, 2019).

Proposition 3 (P3): Employee ambidexterity positively influences employee creativity.

Employees who combine high levels of exploration and exploitation are better able to generate original ideas while refining those ideas into practically useful solutions that satisfy organisational constraints—the dual requirements of creativity (Amabile, 1996; Mom et al., 2009; Caniëls & Veld, 2019). Exploration supplies novelty; exploitation supplies usefulness.

Proposition 4 (P4): Employee ambidexterity mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and employee creativity.

The primary pathway through which entrepreneurial leadership enhances creativity is by developing employees' capacity to integrate exploratory and exploitative behaviours. This mediation proposition constitutes the central theoretical contribution of the framework. Relative to alternative mediators such as creative self-efficacy (Cai et al., 2019), employee ambidexterity captures the behavioural integration of the dual demands that define creativity under operational constraint, rendering it theoretically complementary and, in manufacturing contexts, particularly proximal.

4. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This conceptual paper advances the literature in several ways. First, it theorises employee ambidexterity as a critical mediating mechanism linking entrepreneurial leadership to employee creativity under exploration–exploitation tension, thereby moving beyond the predominant focus on direct effects. Second, it integrates Dynamic Capability Theory across organisational and individual levels and specifies the micro-foundational chain through which strategic leadership capabilities shape employee behaviour and creative outcomes. Third, it differentiates entrepreneurial leadership from ambidextrous leadership, clarifying the distinctive theoretical contribution of an opportunity-oriented leadership approach. Fourth, it extends the application of these constructs into the food and beverage manufacturing sector—an industrially significant context—in which the dual demands of novelty and operational discipline render employee ambidexterity particularly consequential. Fifth, by developing clear, testable propositions, the paper provides a coherent agenda for future empirical research.

4.2 Practical Implications

For managers in food and beverage manufacturing firms, the framework underscores the importance of developing entrepreneurial leadership capabilities that deliberately cultivate both exploratory and exploitative employee behaviours. Leadership development programmes should emphasise opportunity recognition, dual-goal framing, empowerment, support for experimentation within safety and quality constraints, and constructive tolerance of calculated failure. Organisational practices that promote psychological safety, cross-functional collaboration and continuous learning are likely to strengthen employee ambidexterity and, consequently, creative performance. Human resource systems—selection,

training, performance management and reward structures—should be aligned to recognise and reinforce ambidextrous behaviours rather than privileging only short-term efficiency or only radical novelty.

5. Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a conceptual paper, the present work advances theoretical propositions that remain untested. Empirical validation across diverse food and beverage manufacturing contexts, and potentially other manufacturing settings characterised by strong operational constraints, is required. The cross-level application of Dynamic Capability Theory, while theoretically coherent, rests on the assumption that organisational sensing, seizing and reconfiguring processes are readily enacted through individual ambidextrous behaviours; this assumption warrants empirical scrutiny of the intervening organisational conditions. The proposed single-mediator framework prioritises employee ambidexterity; future research may examine complementary or competing mediators (e.g., creative self-efficacy, psychological safety, dual-goal commitment) and potential boundary conditions (e.g., task complexity, regulatory intensity, organisational culture). Finally, the behavioural conceptualisation of employee ambidexterity adopted here may be complemented by cognitive and motivational perspectives in subsequent empirical work.

6. Conclusion

Employee creativity constitutes a vital source of competitive advantage in contemporary manufacturing environments characterised by simultaneous demands for novelty and operational discipline. This paper has argued that entrepreneurial leadership enhances employee creativity primarily by fostering employee ambidexterity—the behavioural capacity to integrate high levels of exploratory and exploitative activities. Grounded in Dynamic Capability Theory and informed by ambidexterity theory and the componential model of creativity, the proposed framework offers a theoretically coherent explanation of how entrepreneurial leaders enable employees to navigate the exploration–exploitation tension and thereby generate novel and useful ideas. By clarifying the mediating role of employee ambidexterity, differentiating entrepreneurial leadership from ambidextrous leadership, specifying the cross-level mechanism and situating the analysis within the food and beverage manufacturing sector, the paper contributes to both scholarly understanding and managerial practice. Future research is invited to validate and extend the framework across diverse organisational and national contexts.

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