

How Strategic Leaders Foster Engineering Organizations' Ambidexterity: A Qualitative Study of Exploration and Exploitation Practices

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how strategic leaders foster organizational ambidexterity by balancing exploration-oriented and exploitation-oriented practices in organizations operating in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 22 strategic leaders, senior managers, innovation managers, and business-unit directors from medium and large organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in strategic decision-making, innovation management, operational improvement, or organizational transformation. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage coding, compare emerging categories, and refine themes. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and the use of direct participant quotations. Analysis generated four main categories: strategic framing of dual priorities, structural separation with integrative coordination, leadership practices for exploratory learning, and disciplined exploitation through performance systems. Participants described ambidexterity as a leadership capability rather than only a structural arrangement. Strategic leaders fostered exploration by legitimizing experimentation, tolerating controlled failure, scanning external opportunities, and creating cross-functional innovation spaces. They supported exploitation by strengthening routines, monitoring performance indicators, improving processes, and protecting operational discipline. The findings indicated that ambidexterity emerged when leaders actively connected innovation initiatives with current business priorities and prevented exploration and exploitation from becoming competing organizational silos. Strategic leaders play a central role in translating organizational ambidexterity from an abstract strategic aspiration into everyday managerial practice. The study suggests that ambidexterity depends on leaders' capacity to create strategic clarity, design flexible structures, encourage exploratory learning, and maintain operational discipline. These findings contribute to ambidexterity literature by explaining the micro-level leadership practices through which exploration and exploitation are simultaneously enacted in organizational settings.

Keywords: Strategic leadership; organizational ambidexterity; exploration; exploitation; qualitative research; innovation management

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1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by technological turbulence, shifting customer expectations, competitive disruption, and institutional uncertainty. In such conditions, sustained performance depends not only on the ability to refine existing capabilities but also on the capacity to discover, experiment with, and develop new possibilities. This dual challenge has been conceptualized in the organizational learning literature as the tension between exploration and exploitation. March (1991) introduced exploration and exploitation as two fundamentally different learning logics. Exploration involves search, variation, experimentation, risk taking, flexibility, discovery, and innovation, whereas exploitation involves refinement, efficiency, implementation, execution, selection, and improvement. The central dilemma is that both are necessary, yet they compete for managerial attention, financial resources, organizational routines, and cognitive commitment. Organizations that overemphasize exploration may generate many ideas without achieving operational reliability, while organizations that overemphasize exploitation may become efficient in the short term but vulnerable to long-term decline.

Organizational ambidexterity addresses this strategic tension by describing the ability of an organization to pursue exploration and exploitation simultaneously. Ambidexterity has become a central construct in strategic management, innovation, and organizational theory because it captures the paradoxical requirement of being both adaptive and aligned. Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) argued that successful organizations must be capable of competing in mature markets while simultaneously creating new products, services, technologies, and business models. O'Reilly and Tushman (2013) later emphasized that ambidexterity is not simply a balance between old and new activities but a dynamic capability through which firms sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure assets to respond to change. In this sense, ambidexterity is closely linked with dynamic capabilities theory, which explains how firms integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007).

The literature has identified different forms of ambidexterity. Structural ambidexterity refers to the separation of exploratory and exploitative activities into distinct organizational units, each with different processes, cultures, metrics, and time horizons, while senior leadership integrates them at the strategic level (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Contextual ambidexterity, by contrast, emphasizes the behavioral capacity of individuals and teams to divide their time and attention between alignment and adaptability within the same organizational context (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). Sequential ambidexterity describes temporal cycling between periods of exploration and periods of exploitation, often in response to environmental shifts or strategic renewal demands (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008).



Although these forms differ, they all suggest that ambidexterity is not automatic. It requires deliberate managerial action, organizational design, and leadership intervention.

Strategic leadership is especially important because exploration and exploitation generate different and sometimes conflicting demands. Exploration requires openness, experimentation, decentralized learning, and tolerance for ambiguity. Exploitation requires discipline, control, standardization, accountability, and efficiency. Leaders must therefore manage contradiction rather than eliminate it. Smith and Tushman (2005) argued that senior teams play a crucial role in managing strategic contradictions by differentiating between competing demands while also integrating them into a coherent organizational agenda. This perspective reframes ambidexterity as a leadership problem: strategic leaders must help organizations hold competing logics together without allowing one logic to dominate completely. Their task is not merely to choose between innovation and efficiency but to create conditions in which both can coexist productively.

Empirical evidence supports the importance of leadership in ambidexterity. Lubatkin et al. (2006) found that top management team behavioral integration supports ambidexterity by enabling senior executives to process complex and contradictory demands collectively. Jansen et al. (2009) showed that strategic leadership behaviors are associated with exploratory and exploitative innovation, with transformational leadership contributing to exploration and transactional leadership supporting exploitation. Rosing et al. (2011) proposed the concept of ambidextrous leadership, distinguishing between opening leader behaviors that encourage exploration and closing leader behaviors that support exploitation. Opening behaviors include encouraging independent thinking, allowing errors, promoting experimentation, and supporting alternative solutions. Closing behaviors include setting rules, monitoring goals, taking corrective action, and ensuring task completion. This theoretical contribution suggests that leadership for innovation is most effective when leaders can flexibly switch between opening and closing behaviors according to the needs of the innovation process.

Despite the growth of ambidexterity research, several gaps remain. First, much of the empirical literature has used quantitative designs to examine antecedents and outcomes of ambidexterity, including performance, innovation, environmental dynamism, and structural arrangements (He & Wong, 2004; Jansen et al., 2009; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). Although these studies have generated valuable generalizable findings, they often provide limited insight into the lived experiences, interpretations, and everyday practices through which strategic leaders enact ambidexterity. Second, many studies conceptualize ambidexterity at the organizational or top management team level, but fewer studies examine how leaders translate abstract strategic tensions into concrete practices such as resource allocation, communication, experimentation, performance monitoring, and cross-functional coordination. Third, most ambidexterity studies have been conducted in Western or multinational contexts. There remains a need for qualitative research in emerging and

transitional economies where organizations face resource constraints, institutional complexity, and volatile market conditions.

The Iranian organizational context provides a relevant setting for examining strategic leadership and ambidexterity. Organizations in Tehran operate in a complex environment shaped by market uncertainty, regulatory pressures, technological change, talent mobility, and financial constraints. These conditions create strong pressure to exploit existing resources efficiently while also exploring new opportunities for innovation, digitalization, product adaptation, and market expansion. In such contexts, strategic leaders may need to develop distinctive practices for balancing short-term survival with long-term renewal. Understanding these practices can enrich ambidexterity theory by highlighting how leaders manage exploration and exploitation under conditions of uncertainty and constraint.

A qualitative approach is appropriate for this inquiry because ambidexterity is not only a structural or performance outcome but also a socially constructed leadership process. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to describe how they interpret strategic tensions, allocate attention, manage competing priorities, and make sense of innovation and efficiency demands. This approach also enables the researcher to identify patterns of meaning that may not be visible through survey instruments. By focusing on the accounts of strategic leaders and senior managers, the present study seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which leaders foster ambidexterity in everyday organizational practice.

The present study aimed to explore how strategic leaders foster organizational ambidexterity by balancing exploration and exploitation practices in organizations operating in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore how strategic leaders foster organizational ambidexterity. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand participants' meanings, interpretations, and lived managerial experiences rather than test predetermined hypotheses. The study focused on strategic leaders and senior managers working in medium and large organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with strategic planning, innovation management, operational improvement, organizational change, or business development.

The final sample consisted of 22 participants. Inclusion criteria were: at least five years of managerial experience, direct involvement in strategic or senior-level decision-making, current employment in an organization located in Tehran, and willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Participants included chief executive officers, deputy directors, strategic planning managers, innovation managers, operations managers, human resource directors, and business-unit managers. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached; after the twentieth interview, no substantially new categories emerged, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation.



Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the literature on organizational ambidexterity, strategic leadership, exploration, exploitation, and innovation management. The guide included open-ended questions such as: “How do you define the balance between innovation and operational efficiency in your organization?”, “What leadership practices support experimentation and learning?”, “How do you prevent exploratory projects from disrupting current operations?”, “How are resources allocated between current business priorities and future-oriented initiatives?”, and “What challenges do leaders face when trying to pursue exploration and exploitation simultaneously?” Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, obtain examples, and encourage participants to elaborate on specific experiences.

Interviews were conducted in a private and convenient setting, either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to record contextual observations, emerging ideas, and analytic reflections. Data collection and preliminary analysis occurred concurrently so that emerging insights could inform later interviews.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively by identifying meaningful units related to leadership practices, exploration, exploitation, strategic tensions, resource allocation, coordination mechanisms, and organizational learning. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage coding, retrieve coded segments, compare patterns across participants, and develop thematic categories.

The coding process involved several stages. First, open coding was used to identify initial concepts in the data. Second, related codes were grouped into subcategories. Third, subcategories were reviewed and integrated into broader main categories that captured the central patterns of meaning. Throughout the process, codes and categories were refined through constant comparison across interviews. The final analysis produced four main categories: strategic framing of dual priorities, structural separation with integrative coordination, leadership practices for exploratory learning, and disciplined exploitation through performance systems.

Several strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness. Credibility was supported through member checking, in which selected participants reviewed summaries of the interpreted findings. Peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative research experts who reviewed the coding structure and thematic coherence. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, interview notes, and theme development. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo-writing to identify and manage researcher assumptions. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the participants, setting, and organizational context.

Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained before the interviews. Participant identities and organizational names were anonymized. Codes such as P1, P2, and P3 were used in reporting quotations.

3. Findings

The study included 22 strategic leaders and senior managers from organizations located in Tehran. Fourteen participants were male (63.6%) and eight were female (36.4%). Participants' ages ranged from 34 to 58 years. Six participants were between 30 and 39 years old (27.3%), ten were between 40 and 49 years old (45.5%), and six were 50 years old or above (27.3%). Regarding educational level, five participants held bachelor's degrees (22.7%), thirteen held master's degrees (59.1%), and four held doctoral degrees (18.2%). In terms of managerial experience, four participants had 5–9 years of experience (18.2%), eleven had 10–15 years (50.0%), and seven had more than 15 years (31.8%). Participants represented diverse sectors, including information technology, manufacturing, financial services, consulting, retail, and knowledge-based services. This diversity allowed the study to capture a broad range of leadership experiences related to exploration and exploitation practices.

The first main category was strategic framing of dual priorities. Participants emphasized that ambidexterity began with how leaders communicated the relationship between current performance and future renewal. Rather than presenting innovation and efficiency as opposing priorities, effective strategic leaders framed them as mutually necessary conditions for organizational survival. Participants explained that employees often interpreted exploration as a threat to current routines or viewed operational discipline as resistance to innovation. Leaders therefore had to create a shared language that clarified why the organization needed both experimentation and execution. One participant stated, "If we talk only about innovation, people think we are ignoring today's targets. If we talk only about efficiency, they think the future has been forgotten. My role is to keep both conversations alive" (P7). Another participant noted, "Ambidexterity is not a slogan. It becomes real when people understand which activities protect the present and which activities build the future" (P12). Strategic framing involved setting dual objectives, linking innovation projects to long-term competitiveness, and explaining how operational excellence created the resources needed for exploration. Leaders used meetings, strategy documents, performance reviews, and informal conversations to reinforce this dual logic. The findings suggest that strategic leaders foster ambidexterity by shaping organizational interpretation and preventing employees from treating exploration and exploitation as incompatible demands.

The second main category was structural separation with integrative coordination. Participants reported that exploratory and exploitative activities often required different structures, timelines, and evaluation criteria. Exploratory initiatives needed flexible teams, faster decision cycles, external collaboration, and tolerance for uncertainty. Exploitative activities required stable processes, clear accountability, and predictable routines. Many



organizations therefore separated innovation projects from core operational units, but participants emphasized that separation alone was insufficient. Without integration, exploratory teams could become disconnected from business realities, while operational units could resist adopting new ideas. One participant explained, “We created a small innovation team, but at first they became like an island. Their ideas were interesting, but operations did not trust them. We learned that separation must be combined with regular coordination” (P3). Another participant stated, “The innovation team can test new models, but from the beginning someone from operations must be involved; otherwise implementation becomes impossible” (P16). Integrative coordination occurred through cross-functional committees, shared steering meetings, senior leadership sponsorship, temporary project teams, and boundary-spanning managers. Leaders played a central role in connecting exploratory units with operational departments and ensuring that promising ideas were transferred into scalable processes. The findings indicate that ambidexterity requires both differentiation and integration: leaders must protect exploratory work from excessive operational control while also ensuring that exploration remains strategically relevant and operationally usable.

The third main category was leadership practices for exploratory learning. Participants described exploration as a fragile process that required psychological safety, external orientation, experimentation, and learning from failure. Strategic leaders fostered exploration by encouraging employees to question assumptions, scan competitors, engage with customers, collaborate with universities or start-ups, and test new ideas through pilots. Participants repeatedly emphasized that exploration could not flourish in a culture where every failure was punished. One participant said, “If every unsuccessful experiment becomes a reason for blame, nobody will experiment again. We try to distinguish between careless mistakes and intelligent failure” (P9). Another participant noted, “For new projects, I ask the team what they learned, not only whether they succeeded. Sometimes the learning is more valuable than the immediate result” (P18). Leaders supported exploratory learning by allocating small budgets for experimentation, creating innovation challenges, inviting external experts, holding learning sessions, and giving teams autonomy in early-stage projects. However, participants also stated that exploration had to be bounded. Leaders did not support unlimited experimentation; instead, they encouraged disciplined experimentation with clear learning goals, time limits, and review points. This category shows that exploration depends on leaders who create openness and flexibility while also guiding experimentation toward strategic opportunities.

The fourth main category was disciplined exploitation through performance systems. Participants explained that ambidexterity did not mean weakening operational discipline. On the contrary, strong exploitation practices were viewed as necessary because they generated the financial stability, customer reliability, and process efficiency required to support exploration. Leaders fostered exploitation by clarifying performance indicators, standardizing core processes, monitoring quality, improving workflows, and reinforcing accountability. One

participant stated, “Innovation is attractive, but if the current business becomes weak, there will be no budget for innovation. Operational discipline pays for exploration” (P5). Another participant explained, “We encourage new ideas, but daily service quality cannot be sacrificed. Customers judge us by what we deliver now” (P14). Participants described the use of dashboards, key performance indicators, operational reviews, cost-control systems, and continuous improvement programs. Strategic leaders were responsible for preventing exploratory enthusiasm from undermining execution. At the same time, they tried to ensure that performance systems did not become so rigid that they blocked adaptation. Some participants described modifying evaluation systems to include both short-term operational targets and longer-term innovation indicators. The findings suggest that disciplined exploitation is not the opposite of ambidexterity; rather, it is one of its foundations when leaders design performance systems that support efficiency without suppressing learning and renewal.

4. Discussion

The present study explored how strategic leaders foster organizational ambidexterity through exploration and exploitation practices in organizations located in Tehran. The findings revealed four main categories: strategic framing of dual priorities, structural separation with integrative coordination, leadership practices for exploratory learning, and disciplined exploitation through performance systems. Overall, the results indicate that ambidexterity is not merely an organizational structure or abstract strategic capability; it is a leadership-mediated process enacted through communication, design, coordination, experimentation, and performance management. This finding is consistent with March’s (1991) foundational argument that exploration and exploitation are both essential but compete for scarce resources and attention. It also aligns with O’Reilly and Tushman’s (2013) view that ambidexterity depends on senior leaders’ ability to manage different strategic logics simultaneously. In the present study, participants described leaders as interpreters of strategic tension who helped employees understand why current efficiency and future innovation had to coexist. This confirms the importance of strategic leadership in transforming paradoxical demands into actionable organizational priorities.

The first category, strategic framing of dual priorities, showed that leaders foster ambidexterity by shaping how organizational members interpret exploration and exploitation. Participants emphasized that innovation and efficiency were often perceived as competing agendas unless leaders actively connected them. This finding supports Smith and Tushman’s (2005) argument that senior leaders must manage strategic contradictions by differentiating between competing demands while integrating them into a coherent whole. It also extends the contextual ambidexterity perspective of Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004), who argued that individuals are more likely to pursue alignment and adaptability when the organizational context enables them to make appropriate judgments. In this study, strategic framing created the interpretive context through which employees could understand when to prioritize



experimentation and when to prioritize operational discipline. The finding suggests that ambidexterity begins not only with formal structures but also with meaning-making. Leaders who repeatedly communicate the complementarity between present performance and future renewal reduce confusion and resistance. This is particularly important in uncertain environments, where employees may view innovation as risky or perceive efficiency demands as signs that leaders are not committed to change.

The second category, structural separation with integrative coordination, supports the structural ambidexterity literature. O'Reilly and Tushman (2004) argued that exploratory and exploitative units often require different architectures, processes, cultures, and metrics. Similarly, participants in this study reported that exploration needed flexible project teams, external networks, and tolerance for uncertainty, while exploitation required standardized routines and operational accountability. However, the findings also show that structural separation can create fragmentation if not accompanied by strong integration. Exploratory units may become isolated from operational realities, and operational units may resist adopting ideas developed outside their routines. This finding is consistent with Raisch and Birkinshaw's (2008) review, which emphasized the need to understand the antecedents and moderators that allow ambidexterity to produce positive outcomes. The present study contributes to this discussion by showing that strategic leaders act as integrative agents. They connect separate units through cross-functional meetings, boundary-spanning roles, steering committees, and shared accountability mechanisms. Therefore, separation protects exploration, but leadership integration converts exploration into organizational value.

The third category, leadership practices for exploratory learning, revealed that strategic leaders foster exploration by creating psychological safety, encouraging external scanning, supporting experimentation, and reframing failure as learning. This finding is aligned with Rosing et al.'s (2011) concept of ambidextrous leadership, particularly opening leader behaviors that encourage independent thinking, variation, experimentation, and alternative solutions. It also supports Jansen et al. (2009), who found that transformational leadership behaviors contribute to exploratory innovation by promoting generative thinking. Participants in the present study did not describe exploration as random creativity; rather, they emphasized disciplined experimentation with clear learning goals, limited budgets, pilot projects, and review points. This distinction is important because it shows that exploration requires both freedom and direction. Strategic leaders encouraged employees to test new ideas but also ensured that exploratory efforts were connected to strategic opportunities. This finding adds qualitative depth to the ambidextrous leadership literature by showing how leaders operationalize opening behaviors in practice: they allocate experimental resources, protect early-stage projects from premature judgment, invite external knowledge, and ask teams what they learned rather than only whether they succeeded.

The fourth category, disciplined exploitation through performance systems, showed that exploitation remains a vital component of ambidexterity. Participants viewed operational

discipline as the foundation that finances and legitimizes exploration. This finding supports Benner and Tushman's (2003) argument that process management and exploitation can improve efficiency and reliability, although excessive emphasis on process control may inhibit exploration. The present study confirms this tension but also shows that strategic leaders can reduce it by designing performance systems that include both operational and innovation indicators. This finding is also consistent with He and Wong (2004), who empirically supported the performance value of jointly pursuing exploration and exploitation. Participants emphasized that organizations cannot pursue innovation effectively if current operations fail to deliver quality, revenue, or customer trust. Therefore, exploitation should not be interpreted as conservative resistance to change. Instead, disciplined exploitation can be a strategic resource when leaders prevent it from becoming rigidity. Effective leaders monitor operational indicators, standardize core processes, and improve efficiency while simultaneously ensuring that performance systems do not punish experimentation or block adaptation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that strategic leaders foster ambidexterity through a dynamic combination of cognitive, structural, behavioral, and control-oriented practices. Cognitively, they frame exploration and exploitation as complementary rather than contradictory. Structurally, they separate exploratory and exploitative activities where necessary but maintain integration through coordination mechanisms. Behaviorally, they promote exploratory learning by encouraging experimentation, external search, and intelligent failure. Operationally, they sustain exploitation by reinforcing performance discipline, quality control, and process improvement. These findings are consistent with dynamic capabilities theory, which argues that firms must sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure resources to sustain performance in changing environments (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). In the present study, strategic leaders served as the human agents through which sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring were enacted. They sensed opportunities through external scanning and experimentation, seized them through resource allocation and innovation projects, and reconfigured the organization through coordination between exploratory and exploitative units.

The study also contributes to ambidexterity literature by emphasizing the practical micro-processes of leadership. Prior studies have established that ambidexterity is associated with innovation and performance outcomes (He & Wong, 2004; Jansen et al., 2009; Lubatkin et al., 2006), but fewer studies have examined how leaders experience and manage ambidexterity in everyday organizational life. The qualitative findings show that strategic leaders face recurring tensions: protecting innovation without isolating it, enforcing discipline without suppressing creativity, allocating resources to future opportunities without weakening current operations, and encouraging learning without tolerating irresponsibility. These tensions require judgment rather than fixed formulas. Ambidexterity therefore appears as an ongoing leadership practice rather than a stable organizational state. Leaders must repeatedly



adjust the balance between opening and closing behaviors, exploration and exploitation, autonomy and control, and separation and integration.

The findings are especially relevant for organizations operating in uncertain and resource-constrained environments. In such contexts, the cost of misallocating resources can be high, and leaders may face pressure to focus on short-term exploitation. However, excessive short-termism can reduce adaptive capacity and expose organizations to future decline. Participants in this study suggested that ambidexterity becomes possible when exploration is conducted through bounded experiments rather than large uncontrolled investments. This approach allows organizations to learn while managing risk. It also suggests that ambidexterity does not require unlimited resources; rather, it requires strategic discipline in how resources are allocated, protected, and evaluated. Leaders can foster ambidexterity by creating small but consistent spaces for exploration while maintaining strong operational performance.

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted with 22 strategic leaders and senior managers in Tehran, which may limit the transferability of the findings to organizations in other cities, countries, or institutional environments. Second, the study relied on self-reported interview data, and participants may have presented their leadership practices in a favorable manner. Third, although the sample included participants from different sectors, the study did not compare ambidexterity practices systematically across industries. Fourth, the qualitative design provided depth of understanding but did not measure the statistical relationship between leadership practices and organizational performance. Finally, because the study was cross-sectional, it captured participants' experiences at one point in time and could not fully examine how ambidexterity practices evolve during long-term organizational transformation.

Future research should examine strategic leadership and organizational ambidexterity across different institutional and cultural contexts to determine whether similar leadership practices emerge in other environments. Comparative qualitative studies could explore differences between industries such as technology, manufacturing, healthcare, financial services, and public organizations. Longitudinal studies would be valuable for understanding how exploration and exploitation practices change over time, particularly during digital transformation, crisis response, or strategic renewal. Future studies could also combine qualitative and quantitative methods by first identifying leadership practices through interviews and then testing their relationship with innovation performance, operational efficiency, employee learning, and organizational resilience. Additional research should examine the role of middle managers, project leaders, and frontline employees in translating strategic ambidexterity into daily routines.

Organizations should develop strategic leaders who can manage paradoxical demands rather than prioritize one-sided solutions. Senior leaders should communicate a clear dual agenda that connects current operational excellence with future-oriented innovation. Organizations should create protected spaces for experimentation while maintaining

coordination with core business units. Leaders should design performance systems that include both efficiency indicators and learning-oriented innovation metrics. Training programs should help leaders develop both opening behaviors, such as encouraging experimentation and questioning assumptions, and closing behaviors, such as setting goals, monitoring implementation, and ensuring accountability. Finally, organizations should treat ambidexterity as a continuous leadership discipline that requires regular communication, resource review, cross-functional integration, and reflective learning.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how strategic leaders foster organizational ambidexterity through exploration and exploitation practices in organizations operating in Tehran. The findings showed that ambidexterity is enacted through four interrelated leadership practices: framing dual priorities, separating exploratory and exploitative activities while integrating them strategically, encouraging exploratory learning, and sustaining disciplined exploitation through performance systems. Strategic leaders were found to play a central role in transforming the abstract tension between innovation and efficiency into practical organizational routines. They created meaning, allocated resources, designed coordination mechanisms, supported experimentation, and protected operational discipline.

The study contributes to the literature by showing that ambidexterity is not only a structural arrangement or performance capability but also a leadership process. Leaders foster ambidexterity when they help organizational members understand the value of both present performance and future renewal. They also enable ambidexterity by creating conditions in which exploration can occur without being destroyed by operational pressures and exploitation can continue without becoming rigid. In practical terms, organizations seeking long-term competitiveness should develop leaders who can combine strategic vision with operational discipline, encourage learning while maintaining accountability, and integrate innovation initiatives with core business priorities. Ambidexterity, therefore, should be understood as a dynamic leadership capability essential for organizational adaptation and sustained performance.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.



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