

# Servant Leadership as a Catalyst for Middle Managers' Learning Ambidexterity: A Resource-Based Perspective

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**Although recent years have seen a proliferation of research on organizational ambidexterity, important questions remain about the role that leaders play in leveraging learning ambidexterity for organizational benefits. Drawing on the conservation of resources theory, we investigate the indirect links between servant leadership and middle managers' learning ambidexterity, with structural empowerment and role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE) as serial mediators. We also examine the importance of leader boundary-spanning behaviour as a moderating factor for these relationships. Using time-lagged and multi-source data from 344 middle managers and their supervisors, we show that servant leadership has a positive indirect influence on two forms of learning ambidexterity: exploitative and explorative learning. In particular, servant leadership promotes structural empowerment (as a contextual resource), which in turn influences RBSE (as a personal resource) and encourages learning ambidexterity. In addition, we show that when leaders engage in boundary-spanning behaviour, these indirect relationships become more prominent. This research offers new theoretical and practical insights to assist organizations in improving learning ambidexterity and achieving higher levels of performance.**

## Introduction

In recent years, a growing body of research has underlined the various contextual and behavioural antecedents and outcomes of organizational ambidexterity (Martin and Javalgi, 2019; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; Simsek, 2009). Leadership is widely recognized as a key determinant of organizational ambidexterity because of its role in optimizing workplace resources and ensuring operational efficiency (Chang and Lee, 2007; Jansen, 2008; Ling, Hammond and Wei, 2022; Nemanich and Vera, 2009; van Assen, 2020). However, the

primary focus of this research has been on the organizational level, with less attention paid to individuals' cognitive processes and capacity to cultivate an adaptive learning mindset. Learning ambidexterity entails the simultaneous use of exploitative learning (i.e. acquiring new knowledge that refines and rejuvenates existing knowledge to exploit current opportunities more efficiently) and explorative learning (i.e. acquiring new knowledge that challenges and modifies the nature of existing knowledge to explore future opportunities) (Ali, 2022; Kang and Snell, 2009). These forms of learning are complementary and jointly provide crucial foundations for organizations to thrive, achieve sustained growth and attain competitive advantage (Chung, Yang and Huang, 2015; Holmqvist, 2004; Levinthal and March, 1993; Uhl-Bien and

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Arena, 2018). Despite progress in this field of study, the role of leaders in promoting exploitative and exploratory learning strategies within organizations is not well understood (Ali *et al.*, 2022).

Addressing this issue is important for two main reasons. First, research on learning ambidexterity and the role of leadership broadens our understanding of how organizations can effectively utilize exploitative and explorative learning techniques to achieve higher performance levels. This is especially important for sustained growth and enhanced competitiveness in today's rapidly changing business environment (Ali *et al.*, 2022; Holmqvist, 2004). Embracing learning ambidexterity also enables organizations and employees to actively pursue novel ideas, experiment with innovative approaches, optimize existing processes and foster a culture of continuous improvement (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). Managers can strike a balance between exploring new opportunities, maximizing existing competencies and adapting more effectively to emerging market conditions. Second, the lack of empirical research on leaders' role in facilitating learning ambidexterity leaves top management teams with an incomplete picture of best practices for differentiating themselves and maintaining a competitive edge. When leaders demonstrate commitment to organizational learning, they convey a strong message that ambidexterity is valued and encouraged in the workplace (Ling, Hammond and Wei, 2022; Nemanich and Vera, 2009). Such insights are invaluable for developing effective organizational interventions and optimizing workplace initiatives that encourage ambidextrous behaviour among employees.

Advancing the ambidexterity literature, we develop and test a theoretical model on how and when servant leadership can positively influence middle managers' learning ambidexterity. Using conservation of resources theory (COR: Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), we argue that middle managers, under servant leaders, are subject to vital psychological and social resources, which can be leveraged to encourage a proactive learning mindset and drive the effective pursuit of new competencies. Servant leadership is an other-centred approach that prioritizes the needs of others and encourages subordinates to strive for higher career and organizational goals (Liden *et al.*, 2015, p. 163). Compared to other leadership styles, such as authentic, ethical and transformational leadership, servant leadership has a greater potential for en-

hancing personal growth (Hoch *et al.*, 2018), which can improve ambidextrous learning within an organization. We examine servant leadership in the context of middle managers, recognizing the latter's unique position as a vital link between senior management and frontline employees (Ali *et al.*, 2022; Taylor and Helfat, 2009). When exposed to servant leadership, middle managers gain access to valuable resources and opportunities to develop themselves and incorporate both exploitative and explorative learning strategies in their job performance.

To further illuminate the link between servant leadership and middle managers' learning ambidexterity, we examine the serial mediating roles of structural empowerment and middle managers' sense of role breadth self-efficacy (RBSE). Structural empowerment is defined as 'the existence of social structures at work that allow individuals to achieve their work goals through access to opportunities, relevant information, and resources' (Monje Amor, Abeal Vázquez and Faña, 2020, p. 779). This provides a supportive context in which individuals can identify and pursue new opportunities, while leveraging existing knowledge to achieve higher levels of performance (Axtell and Parker, 2003; Neves, Pires and Costa, 2021). In other words, structural empowerment is a crucial contextual resource for pursuing and achieving professional goals in a self-determined and responsible manner (Lee and Edmondson, 2017). Similarly, RBSE refers to an individual's level of confidence in taking on a more proactive and expansive role that exceeds routine and standard job functions (Parker, 1998). As a personal resource, RBSE provides individuals with the means to navigate various job-related challenges and excel in their professional lives (Strauss, Griffin and Rafferty, 2009). We view it as a key determinant of creative problem solving (Beltrán-Martín *et al.*, 2017), which is essential for promoting exploitative and exploratory learning ambidexterity.

Additionally, we explore the vital role of leader boundary-spanning behaviour as a moderating factor for the indirect links between servant leadership and middle managers' learning ambidexterity. Boundary-spanning behaviour focuses on building and nurturing interpersonal relationships with various entities within and across organizational boundaries (Kim, Lee and Yun, 2022, p. 837). This type of behaviour enables individuals to establish meaningful networks with both internal and

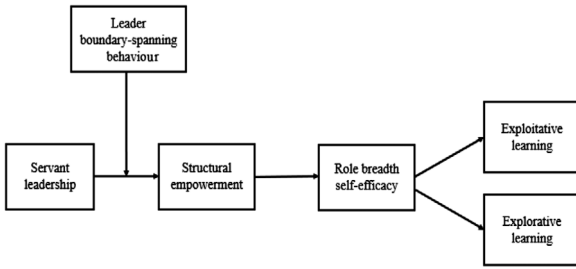


Figure 1. The proposed model

external organizational stakeholders, thereby facilitating mutual exchange of knowledge and information (Kim, Lee and Yun, 2022). It also provides individuals with access to relevant social resources to promote organizational learning and ensure greater adaptability to new challenges (Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2018). In this light, we argue that the positive indirect relationship between servant leadership and middle managers’ learning ambidexterity via structural empowerment and RBSE is stronger in workplaces where leaders engage in boundary-spanning behaviour. Our reasoning is that engaging in boundary-spanning behaviour enables a leader to expand the organization’s resource pool for a more supportive and adaptable business environment, thereby enhancing both explorative and exploitative learning ambidexterity. Our model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Our study offers valuable contributions to the literature on ambidexterity. First, building on prior research (Jansen, 2008; Ling, Hammond and Wei, 2022; van Assen, 2020), we shed new light on the relationship between servant leadership and middle managers’ ability to employ both exploratory and exploitative learning strategies to benefit their organizations. In doing so, we respond to Ali *et al.*’s (2022) call for a better understanding of the mechanisms that foster effective leadership and its relationship with organizational learning practices. Second, our study contributes new knowledge by illuminating the serial mediating roles of structural empowerment and RBSE in relation to servant leadership and two forms of learning ambidexterity. Accordingly, we provide fresh perspectives on how effective leadership enhances contextual and personal resources within organizations, thereby fostering ambidextrous learning among middle managers. Third, existing research has acknowledged the importance of boundary-spanning behaviour in influencing various out-

comes, such as self-efficacy and creativity (Kim, Lee and Yun, 2022). Using a resource-based approach, our study expands the literature by showing how organizational learning can be improved when leaders actively create meaningful networks both within and across organizational boundaries.

## Theory and hypothesis development

Our hypotheses are grounded in the fundamental principles of servant leadership, which prioritizes the fulfillment of subordinates’ needs over self-serving interests (Hoch, 2018; Liden, 2015; Usman *et al.*, 2022). Servant leadership entails putting others first, creating a supportive and nurturing environment and promoting a sense of psychological safety and confidence in their personal growth. In such an environment, individuals receive essential psychological and social resources that enable proactive learning, acquisition of new skills and achievement of higher goals (Xu and Wang, 2020). At the core of these arguments lies COR theory, which asserts that individuals strive to acquire, protect and foster valuable resources that help them achieve their objectives (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). This theoretical framework underscores the notion that individuals are motivated to safeguard and enhance their resources, as a loss or scarcity of these resources can adversely affect performance and lead to unfavourable outcomes (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). By placing a focus on subordinates’ well-being and creating a supportive environment in which they can flourish, servant leaders actively contribute to employees’ social and psychological advancement. This approach not only fosters positive attitudes in the workplace but also enhances the effective performance of assigned duties (Hoch *et al.*, 2018).

According to COR theory, resources include a variety of tangible and intangible assets that are essential for individuals’ well-being, as well as their ability to cope with stress, adapt to challenges and achieve greater goals (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). These assets manifest themselves in various forms, including contextual resources that serve as a crucial means for acquiring additional resources and safeguarding oneself against resource depletion (Parker *et al.*, 2019). For example, structural empowerment as a contextual resource enables individuals to exercise discretion in their jobs and realize their full potential within the

workplace (Neves, Pires and Costa, 2021). Individuals can also benefit from personal resources, such as RBSE, which facilitates efficiency in executing daily tasks (Strauss, Griffin and Rafferty, 2009). Nonetheless, it is critical to recognize the interdependence and mutual influence of various forms of resources (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). For instance, contextual resources can affect individuals' access to other personal and social resources, whereas personal resources can influence an individual's ability to leverage other resources, resulting in improved task performance (Parker *et al.*, 2019).

Guided by COR theory, we argue that servant leadership confers substantial advantages to middle managers in terms of both explorative and exploitative learning ambidexterity. The underlying premise is that servant leadership enables employees to access relevant psychological and social resources, allowing them to fully utilize their capabilities. This, in turn, stimulates a continuous process of active learning, ensuring that all acquired knowledge is utilized for the organization's benefit. We contend that this resource-based process is facilitated by a serial mediation mechanism. First, servant leadership promotes structural empowerment, which enables middle managers to take ownership of their work and actively contribute to the organization's learning initiatives. Second, structural empowerment serves as a catalyst for the acquisition and retention of personal resources, specifically in the form of RBSE. The implication for middle managers is that they can be inspired and motivated to leverage their skills and make more observable contributions to organizational learning.

#### *Servant leadership and structural empowerment*

As mentioned earlier, COR theory suggests that acquiring resources in one domain can significantly impact the acquisition of resources in other domains (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). For example, effective leaders can empower their teams by providing the necessary support and resources for optimal task performance. This creates an environment that fosters structural empowerment, a contextual resource that enables individuals to perform their jobs confidently. There are several effective avenues through which servant leaders can promote structural empowerment. First, they can facilitate access to skill enhancement programmes

and offer challenging tasks that stimulate creativity and professional development (Kanter, 1977; Monje Amor, Abeal Vázquez and Faíña, 2020). They can also support subordinates by encouraging active participation in workplace decision-making and creating a safe space in which opinions can be expressed without fear or scepticism (Eva *et al.*, 2019). As a result, subordinates are inspired to actively engage in new learning opportunities and readily embrace the resources available within the workplace (Spears, 2005).

Second, increasing structural empowerment entails clearly communicating organizational policies, values and expectations to employees (Kanter, 1977; Monje Amor, Abeal Vázquez and Faíña, 2020). This fosters a supportive climate of knowledge sharing within the organization and enables employees to make decisions that align with organizational priorities (Blake, 2022; Hakimi, Van Knippenberg and Giessner, 2010). When employees have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, they can better align their efforts with established organizational guidelines and principles. Third, servant leaders empower their subordinates by providing adequate support through performance evaluations (Kanter, 1977; Monje Amor, Abeal Vázquez and Faíña, 2020). They actively listen to their followers and offer timely feedback, enabling them to adapt, learn and grow both professionally and personally (Neubert *et al.*, 2022). These actions promote structural empowerment, allowing subordinates to develop their skills and excel in their roles. They also create supportive working conditions that encourage employee growth, development and overall contribution to organizational success. Based on the foregoing, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1: Servant leadership is positively related to structural empowerment.*

#### *Structural empowerment and RBSE*

COR theory suggests that resources across various domains are highly interconnected, implying that changes in one domain can influence resources in other domains (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). For example, when middle managers experience structural empowerment as a contextual resource, this can positively influence other personal resources and contribute to improved

performance. In other words, by fostering structural empowerment through the supportive actions of servant leaders, middle managers have an opportunity to increase their sense of RBSE. This can be achieved in a variety of ways. First, in workplaces that prioritize structural empowerment, middle managers have access to learning opportunities, clear information about organizational values and timely performance-related feedback. These job characteristics create higher levels of confidence in performing diverse roles, allowing middle managers to be more productive in collaborating effectively and solving problems in an adaptive manner (Biron and Bamberger, 2010). Indeed, when employees have adequate resources at work, they feel more empowered to carry out their responsibilities with greater confidence and proficiency (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). They become more open to new ways of doing things and are better prepared to approach work-related challenges and obstacles from a new angle (Parker, 1998).

Workplaces that encourage structural empowerment create an atmosphere where middle managers are motivated to collaborate and form connections with stakeholders across various departments (Axtell and Parker, 2003). This collaborative approach facilitates the exchange of knowledge and ideas, which can ultimately improve individuals' overall effectiveness in their jobs. Moreover, when middle managers are given the opportunity to work effectively with others, they become more self-sufficient in driving continuous improvement within their roles (Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse, 2022). As a result, they gain the essential skills and personal resources to demonstrate self-efficacy and effectively apply their expertise for the benefit of the organization. Third, in workplaces that encourage structural empowerment, top management teams typically provide adequate support to middle managers, which increases morale and performance (Burke, 2019; Martin, Liao and Campbell, 2013). Recent research indicates that providing support to employees not only increases their sense of engagement but also improves their capacity to complete tasks and excel in their roles (Ogbonnaya and Babalola, 2021). These employees can develop a greater sense of self-efficacy in the face of work challenges, leading to higher levels of overall performance. Based on these considerations, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H2: Structural empowerment is positively related to middle managers' sense of RBSE.*

### *RBSE and learning ambidexterity*

From a resource-based standpoint, middle managers' RBSE can enhance ambidextrous learning in several ways. First, RBSE serves as a personal resource that increases individuals' sense of belief in their capacity to undertake and excel in assigned tasks (Kim, Lee and Yun, 2022; Parker, 1998). This sense of confidence drives motivation, effort and persistence when faced with challenges or obstacles related to job-related responsibilities. Indeed, middle managers who possess these characteristics have no trouble recognizing opportunities to use the knowledge and skills acquired from one aspect of their job to improve their abilities in other areas (Axtell and Parker, 2003). As a result, they feel more resourceful in taking on new roles and integrating exploitative and explorative learning strategies into their job performance. Second, armed with a heightened sense of confidence in their task performance, middle managers can effectively find and take advantage of learning opportunities that benefit the organization (Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse, 2022). For example, they can leverage these opportunities to achieve successful product launches, analyse customer feedback, track market trends and identify areas for better resource allocation (Beltrán-Martín *et al.*, 2017; Strauss, Griffin and Rafferty, 2009).

Third, middle managers with a high RSBE have a unique ability to balance exploitative and explorative learning methods, allowing for more agile and responsive organizational adaptation (Laureiro-Martinez *et al.*, 2015). For example, when it comes to exploitative learning, these managers can effectively apply their skills and expertise to optimize operations and capitalize on opportunities for continuous improvement within their respective roles. At the same time, they are more likely to embrace exploratory learning by effectively navigating uncertainties, learning from failures and adapting to new situations. These arguments are consistent with previous research, which indicates that individuals with a suitable level of self-efficacy are more capable of meeting the demands of their roles, as well as demonstrating the flexibility necessary to transition between exploitative and explorative learning (Bledow *et al.*, 2009). In addition, these individuals can adapt

their learning techniques to specific contexts and challenges, thereby increasing the organization's ability to thrive in an ever-changing business landscape (Levinthal and March, 1993). Based on this reasoning, we anticipate a positive relationship between middle managers' RBSE and both forms of learning ambidexterity.

*H3: Middle managers' sense of RBSE is positively related to the simultaneous use of explorative and exploitative learning strategies.*

#### *Serial mediation between servant leadership and learning ambidexterity*

Combining the above predictions, we propose that servant leadership influences structural empowerment (H1), which enhances middle managers' RBSE (H2) and, in turn, learning ambidexterity (H3). This serial mediation is grounded in the core principles of COR theory, which suggest that obtaining resources in one area can significantly impact the acquisition of resources in other domains (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018; Parker *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, servant leadership fosters an empowering and supportive environment that encourages individuals to feel safe and confident in their journey towards personal development (Liden *et al.*, 2015). In such an environment, individuals have access to valuable job-related resources that facilitate proactive learning, skill improvement and the pursuit of higher goals (Xu and Wang, 2020). One such resource is structural empowerment, a contextual resource that enables individuals to exercise discretion in the workplace and realize their full potential (Monje Amor, Abeal Vázquez and Faña, 2020). This, in turn, improves access to and maintenance of other personal resources such as RBSE, which promotes the effective utilization of exploitative and exploratory learning strategies. Based on these considerations, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H4: Servant leadership is indirectly related to middle managers' exploitative and explorative learning through structural empowerment and RBSE as serial mediators.*

#### *Leader boundary-spanning behaviour as a moderator*

COR theory emphasizes the interplay of resources, highlighting their ability to mutually influence

each other (Hobfoll, 1989). This implies that two or more resources can have a synergistic relationship, where their combined impact is greater than the sum of their individual effects (Hu, Schaufeli and Taris, 2011; Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). For instance, when individuals experience perseverance as a psychological resource and engage in knowledge sharing as a social resource, these resources can interact to bring about distinct benefits in the face of work-related stress. Similarly, the combination of job autonomy (personal resource) with a supportive climate (contextual resource) can result in even better outcomes compared to each resource functioning independently. In this light, we identify leader boundary-spanning behaviour as a social resource that moderates the indirect influence of servant leadership on middle managers' learning ambidexterity via structural empowerment (contextual resource) and RBSE (personal resource).

Boundary-spanning behaviour encompasses a variety of outward-focused activities, such as persuading internal and external stakeholders to support organizational objectives, obtaining important information and resources from stakeholders and utilizing these to enhance the well-being and performance of organizational members (Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2018). Engaging in such activities provides leaders with opportunities to expand their knowledge and enhance access to a broader range of expertise. These resources can then be utilized to generate more comprehensive and effective solutions to organizational problems, leading to optimal operation levels (Kim, Lee and Yun, 2022). This is particularly beneficial in the context of servant leadership, where leaders create a collaborative environment that enables subordinates to grow and establish connections across organizational boundaries. Subordinates are empowered to explore new problem-solving approaches, actively participate in decision-making processes and ultimately contribute to workplace effectiveness. In line with these considerations, we argue that servant leaders who engage in boundary-spanning behaviour are better positioned to create empowering working conditions that facilitate adaptive learning and higher levels of performance among subordinates.

*H5: Leader boundary-spanning behaviour moderates the positive relationship between servant leadership and structural empowerment such*

that this relationship is stronger when boundary spanning is high (vs. low).

Furthermore, we hypothesize that the indirect relationship between servant leadership and learning ambidexterity via structural empowerment and RBSE as serial mediators is stronger when leaders engage in boundary-spanning behaviour. The underlying rationale for this argument lies in the nature of servant leadership, which emphasizes putting others first and creating a positive work environment that nurtures personal and professional development (Liden *et al.*, 2015). This leadership style also promotes a learning-oriented organizational culture, in which individuals are motivated to try new things, take risks and learn from their experiences (Neubert *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, recent studies suggest that leaders who engage in boundary-spanning behaviour can create an environment that fosters creativity and innovation (Kim, Lee and Yun, 2022; Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2018). By facilitating the exchange of information, resources and ideas across different areas of the organization, servant leaders enhance the positive impact of their leadership style. Thus, middle managers working under such leaders are more likely to adopt both exploratory and exploitative behaviours, which contribute to organizational learning. Along these lines, we contend that the indirect relationship between servant leadership and middle managers' learning ambidexterity is particularly pronounced when leaders actively engage in boundary-spanning behaviour.

*H6:* Leader boundary-spanning behaviour moderates the indirect link between servant leadership and exploitative and explorative learning (via structural empowerment and RBSE) such that this relationship is stronger when boundary spanning is high (vs. low).

## Methodology

### *Data collection and analysis*

We collected data from 344 middle managers and their supervisors who were alumni of a renowned public-sector university in Southern Asia. This university offers a wide range of graduate and executive education programmes and maintains a comprehensive database of its alumni working in different administrative and leadership po-

sitions. Instead of directly examining the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of the South Asian region, our research aimed to provide fresh insights that complement existing studies, which have primarily been influenced by Western perspectives. Initially, we obtained permission from 500 alumni to participate in our research and extended invitations to them. Prior to collecting data, we conducted a briefing session to ensure the participants understood our research objectives and could provide appropriate responses to our surveys. For example, we restricted participation to middle managers with at least five direct reports to ensure that our sample included individuals with a certain level of managerial responsibility. Additionally, participants received an information sheet that outlined our research protocol and our commitment to upholding ethical standards. Our final sample consisted of middle managers and supervisors from various firms operating in the manufacturing and service sectors, including steel, textiles, cement manufacturing, telecommunications, hospitality and tourism.

We conducted three rounds of surveys (with two months between each round) to minimize common method bias. At Time 1, we received 398 responses from middle managers who rated their supervisors' levels of servant leadership and boundary-spanning behaviour. Additionally, middle managers provided demographic information including age, gender, graduate qualifications and employment tenure. At Time 2, we gathered data from 387 middle managers who rated their perceptions of structural empowerment at work. At Time 3, we received responses from 377 middle managers regarding their perception of RBSE, whereas 351 supervisors rated two aspects of middle managers' learning ambidexterity (i.e. exploitative and explorative learning). After reviewing and matching the data from different survey rounds, 344 middle manager/supervisor responses were retained for hypothesis testing. The final sample consisted of 53.8% male and 46.2% female middle managers. The mean age and tenure with the current organization were 41.94 years and 3.53 years, respectively. Regarding education, 55.8% of the respondents had completed undergraduate degrees and the remaining 44.2% had master's degrees. The data were analysed using structural equation modelling in Mplus (version 8.6).

### Measures and variables

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Servant leadership.** At Time 1, servant leadership was assessed using Liden *et al.*'s (2015) seven-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Sample item: 'My leader puts my best interests ahead of his/her own'.

**Leader boundary-spanning behaviour.** Leader boundary-spanning behaviour was also assessed at Time 1 using a six-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) developed by Marrone, Tesluk and Carson (2007). Sample item: 'My supervisor reaches out to individuals outside of our organization that can offer expertise or ideas about the task at hand'.

**Structural empowerment.** We measured structural empowerment at Time 2 using the 12-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) developed by Laschinger *et al.* (2001). Sample item: 'I have the chance to gain new skills and knowledge on the job'.

**RBSE.** We measured RBSE at Time 3 using a 10-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) developed by Parker (1998). Sample item: 'I feel confident while contributing to discussions about the company's strategy'.

**Exploitative learning and explorative learning.** At Time 3, supervisors rated middle managers' exploitative ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ) and explorative learning ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ) using a modified five-item scale from Chung, Yang and Huang (2015). Sample item (exploitative learning): 'He/she searches for the usual and generally proven methods and solutions to work-related problems'. Sample item (explorative learning): 'He/she collects novel information and ideas that go beyond his/her experience'.

### Control variables

We controlled for demographic factors, such as age, gender, work experience and education, because previous research has shown that they can impact the outcomes of leadership and organizational learning (Ali *et al.*, 2022). We also controlled for ethical leadership given that it shares similarities with servant leadership and other related concepts. Ethical leadership was measured using a 10-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) from Brown, Treviño and Harrison (2005). Sample item: 'My supervisor listens to what employees have to say'.

## Analysis and results

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to validate the measurement model with the following variables: servant leadership, structural empowerment, RBSE, leader boundary-spanning behaviour, exploitative learning and explorative learning. The fit indices indicated appropriate consistency between the measurement model and the data:  $\chi^2(926) = 1841.02$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.99$ , IFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.91, CFI = 0.91, RMR = 0.07, RMSEA = 0.05. The average variance extracted (AVE) was also greater than 0.50 for all variables (Table 1). Furthermore, the square root of the AVE was greater than the inter-construct correlations, whereas the average shared variance (ASV) and maximum shared variance (MSV) were smaller than the AVE (Table 1).

### Hypothesis testing

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables, while Table 3 provides estimates of the regression paths. As shown in Table 3, servant leadership was positively associated with structural empowerment ( $\beta = 0.24$ , SE = 0.05,  $p < 0.01$ ). Likewise, structural empowerment was positively associated with RBSE ( $\beta = 0.29$ , SE = 0.07,  $p < 0.01$ ). RBSE, in turn, showed positive relationships with both exploitative ( $\beta = 0.28$ , SE = 0.04,  $p < 0.01$ ) and explorative ( $\beta = 0.23$ , SE = 0.04,  $p < 0.01$ ) learning ambidexterity. Thus, H1–H3 were supported. Moreover, we found significant serially mediated relationships between servant leadership and both forms of learning ambidexterity, exploitative ( $\beta = 0.02$ , SE = 0.008,  $p < 0.01$ ) and explorative learning ( $\beta = 0.02$ , SE = 0.007,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, H4 was fully supported.

H5 and H6 were tested by adding the interaction term between servant leadership and leader boundary-spanning behaviour to the indirect effects model. The moderation analysis (Table 3) revealed a significant effect for the interaction between leaders' boundary-spanning behaviour and servant leadership ( $\beta = 0.19$ , SE = 0.03,  $p < 0.01$ ). Figure 2 illustrates the precise nature of the moderated path. It includes simple slope plots that depict the relationship between servant leadership and structural empowerment under two different



Table 1. Discriminant and convergent validity

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	AVE	MSV	ASV
1. Servant leadership	<b>0.72</b>						0.52	0.10	0.06
2. Structural empowerment	0.32	<b>0.86</b>					0.74	0.10	0.07
3. RBSE	0.25	0.28	<b>0.80</b>				0.64	0.18	0.09
4. Exploitative learning	0.25	0.27	0.43	<b>0.78</b>			0.61	0.21	0.11
5. Explorative learning	0.27	0.27	0.36	0.46	<b>0.79</b>		0.63	0.21	0.10
6. LBSB	0.01	-0.07	0.00	-0.07	0.01	<b>0.85</b>	0.73	0.004	0.002

Note: N = 344. AVE = average variance extracted; MSV = maximum shared variance; ASV = average shared variance. Bold values on the diagonals of columns 2 to 5 are the square root values of AVE. RBSE = role breadth self-efficacy; LBSB = leader’s boundary-spanning behaviour.

Table 2. Means and correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Servant leadership	3.02	0.91										
2. Structural empowerment	3.12	0.85	0.25**									
3. RBSE	3.11	1.18	0.22**	0.25**								
4. Exploitative learning	3.93	0.98	0.22**	0.24**	0.40**							
5. Explorative learning	3.71	1.05	0.24**	0.24**	0.31**	0.41**						
6. LBSB	3.39	1.27	0.01	-0.05	0.01	-0.07	0.01					
7. Ethical leadership	3.01	1.05	0.28**	0.24**	0.28**	0.21**	0.18**	0.25**				
8. Age	41.94	5.24	-0.02	-0.03	0.02	0.03	-0.03	-0.02	-0.11*			
9. Gender	-	-	-0.06	-0.01	-0.06	0.02	0.09	-0.01	-0.08	0.04		
10. Education	-	-	0.11*	0.08	0.03	0.04	-0.02	0.00	0.09	-0.08	-0.02	
11. Tenure	3.53	1.40	-0.04	0.07	-0.01	0.04	0.03	-0.05	0.06	-0.15**	0.00	0.06

Note: N = 344. RBSE = role breadth self-efficacy; LBSB = leader’s boundary-spanning behaviour.

\*p < 0.05. \*\*p < 0.01.

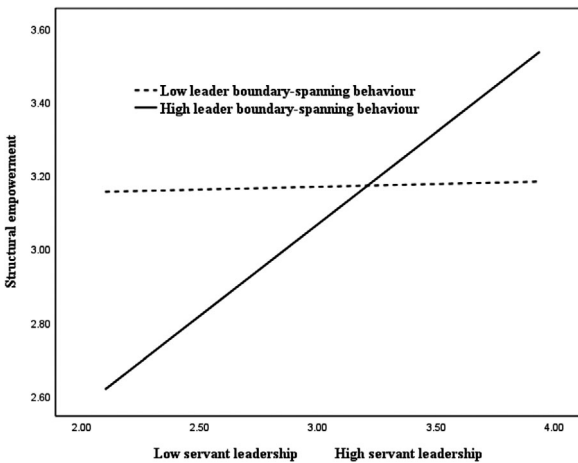


Figure 2. Leader’s boundary-spanning behaviour as a moderator of the relationship between servant leadership and structural empowerment

levels of the moderator: low boundary-spanning behaviour (one standard deviation below the

mean) and high boundary-spanning behaviour (one standard deviation above the mean). Specifically, the relationship between servant leadership and structural empowerment was significant ( $\beta = 0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) when leaders’ boundary-spanning behaviour was high, but non-significant ( $\beta = 0.01$ , ns) when their boundary-spanning behaviour was low. Thus, H5 was supported. Furthermore, the moderation analysis revealed that the positive indirect relationships (via structural empowerment and RBSE) between servant leadership and both exploitative ( $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.008$ ,  $CI = (0.007, 0.04)$ ) and explorative learning ( $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.007$ ,  $CI = (0.05, 0.04)$ ) were stronger when leader boundary-spanning behaviour was high (vs. low). The moderated mediation index was significant for both paths involving exploitative learning (index = 0.015,  $SE = 0.0026$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $CI = (0.005, 0.03)$ ) and explorative learning (index = 0.013,  $SE = 0.005$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $CI = (0.004, 0.03)$ ). Thus, H6 was supported.

Table 3. Hypothesis results

Total effect	$\beta$	SE
Servant leadership → Exploitative learning	0.24**	0.05
Servant leadership → Explorative learning	0.28**	0.06
<i>Direct paths</i>		
Servant leadership → Exploitative learning	0.12**	0.05
Servant leadership → Explorative learning	0.17**	0.06
Servant leadership → Structural empowerment	0.24**	0.05
Structural empowerment → RBSE	0.29**	0.07
RBSE → Exploitative learning	0.28**	0.04
RBSE → Explorative learning	0.23**	0.04
<i>Indirect paths</i>		
Servant leadership → Structural empowerment → RBSE → Exploitative learning	0.02**	0.008
Servant leadership → Structural empowerment → RBSE → Explorative learning	0.02**	0.007
<i>Moderated paths</i>		
Servant leadership × LBSB → Structural empowerment	0.19**	0.03
Servant leadership × LBSB → Structural empowerment → RBSE → Exploitative learning	0.02**	0.008
Servant leadership × LBSB → Structural empowerment → RBSE → Explorative learning	0.02**	0.007

Note: N = 344 (bootstrapping by specifying a sample of size 5000). RBSE = role breadth self-efficacy; LBSB = leader's boundary-spanning behaviour.

\*\*p < 0.01.

## Discussion

We developed a serial mediation model on how and when servant leadership influences two forms of learning ambidexterity among middle managers. Using COR theory, we found evidence that servant leadership fosters structural empowerment, a crucial contextual resource, which in turn influences other personal resources such as RBSE, leading to enhanced exploitative and explorative learning. Our analysis also reported evidence that the boundary-spanning behaviour of leaders serves as an important moderating factor for these relationships.

### *Theoretical implications*

Our research adds to the existing knowledge on ambidexterity by theorizing a resource-based model through the lens of COR theory. We highlight the importance of effective leadership in acquiring and maintaining valuable resources across various domains, and how this can positively influence organizational learning. As an other-oriented leadership style, servant leadership provides access to key psychological and social resources that can be leveraged to cultivate a proactive learning mindset and promote effective utilization of one's skills (Liden *et al.*, 2015). This leadership style brings about notable benefits because it focuses

prioritizing the needs and well-being of followers while encouraging them to embrace efficiency in their job performance (Taylor and Helfat, 2009). Our research offers fresh insights into how middle managers, under servant leaders, are motivated to seek out new and innovative ways to excel in their roles. The findings also underscore the empowering nature of this approach for middle managers, leading to tangible improvements in organizational performance. While previous research has recognized the importance of leadership in influencing ambidextrous outcomes at work (Jansen, 2008; Nemanich and Vera, 2009; van Assen, 2020), our study presents a resource-based model that organizations can use to effectively implement these strategies.

As part of this resource-based framework, we showed that structural empowerment has a positive influence on middle managers' personal resources (in the form of RBSE) and that these resources serve as enabling mechanisms between servant leadership and learning ambidexterity. Our findings build upon previous research that acknowledges the importance of structural empowerment as a contextual resource derived from the various systems, practices and structures implemented within an organization to foster employees' job performance (Biron and Bamberger, 2010). Structural empowerment is also essential in providing individuals with a stronger sense

of control and ownership over their work duties (Monje Amor, Abeal Vázquez and Faíña, 2020). Access to these resources enables middle managers to develop self-confidence in their ability to execute tasks and perform their job roles successfully. This, in turn, drives employees' motivation to positively influence workplace decision-making processes and contribute to the overall success of the organization (Parker, 1998). By adopting a resource-based perspective, our research provides a deeper understanding of how effective leadership fosters ambidextrous behaviour among middle managers through the acquisition and preservation of valuable resources.

Another significant contribution of our research is to demonstrate the importance of leader boundary-spanning behaviour as a key moderating factor in enhancing the positive indirect influence of servant leadership on learning ambidexterity. Research has shown that boundary-spanning behaviour enables leaders to coordinate the flow and exchange of information, insights and resources across organizational boundaries (Kim, Lee and Yun, 2022). Indeed, leaders who engage in this behaviour can establish strong connections and networks with individuals both inside and outside the organization, allowing for the effective sharing and leveraging of best practices (Salem, Van Quaquebeke and Besiou, 2018). Our findings support these ideas, emphasizing the critical role of leader boundary-spanning behaviour in empowering middle managers to effectively utilize both exploitative and explorative learning strategies to achieve higher performance levels. This emphasis on leader boundary-spanning behaviour adds a novel dimension to our knowledge of how organizations can adopt a more holistic approach to promote organizational learning through effective leadership practices. In addition, our research has important implications for future research on learning ambidexterity because it advocates for enhanced information exchange and effective resource coordination within and across organizational boundaries.

### *Practical implications*

Our findings provide practical insights for organizations seeking to promote servant leadership and foster an empowering environment in which middle managers can learn from their experiences and develop a diverse set of skills. To accomplish this,

senior executives and high-level managers must set a precedent that motivates junior colleagues to internalize the value of servant leadership and embrace the opportunities it affords in fostering organizational learning. They should also provide the resources and support needed for organizational members to embrace a proactive learning mindset and take the initiative in their jobs. This stems from the core characteristics of servant leadership, including empathy, providing a safe space for open communication, active listening and promoting the needs and well-being of others (Liden *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, our findings demonstrate that the primary mechanism by which servant leadership enhances learning ambidexterity is by shaping structural empowerment and providing middle managers with a greater sense of self-efficacy in performing their jobs. As a result, middle managers become more confident in broadening their knowledge and establishing learning goals that align with the organization's strategic priorities (Parker, 1998).

Furthermore, our findings underscore the importance of acquiring and preserving valuable psychological and social resources, as doing so confers key benefits to the efficient utilization of exploitative and explorative learning techniques. Indeed, organizational leaders play a crucial role in providing opportunities for middle managers to advance their skills and capitalize on existing knowledge and possibilities. They are responsible for fostering an empowering work environment, in which subordinates can nurture their personal and professional selves and achieve a greater sense of purpose at work. When employees are empowered to maximize both individual and organizational-level resources, they make better decisions, feel more confident in their abilities and employ innovative strategies at work (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, our findings concerning the moderating role of leader boundary-spanning behaviour are also critical for employers seeking to ensure effective information exchange within and across organizational boundaries. In this light, organizations should carefully consider leaders' behavioural traits during critical activities such as selection processes, performance appraisals and skills development programmes. This holds great promise for increasing the positive impact of servant leadership and ensuring that the organization benefits from ambidextrous learning strategies.

### Limitations and future research directions

Our study has important strengths that deserve mention. For instance, our hypotheses were supported by a well-developed theoretical framework, assessed using a three-wave, multi-source sample. This reduced the potential impact of common method bias and ensured the validity of our findings. Despite these strengths, our study had some limitations. Compared to quasi-experimental designs, such as cross-lagged models, our study did not account for autocorrelation, making it impossible to draw causal inferences (Ogbonnaya *et al.*, 2022). To address this, future research should employ longitudinal designs that permit the collection of data on predictors and outcomes over multiple periods. A second limitation is that the sample was drawn from organizations in Southern Asia with a collectivist culture. Because of key socioeconomic and cultural differences, our findings may not be fully generalizable to Western contexts. To increase the generalizability of our findings, we recommend that future research tests our hypotheses in various contexts.

Furthermore, while the current study established the role of structural empowerment and RBSE as serial mediators, other mechanisms can explain the relationship between servant leadership and learning ambidexterity. For example, scholars could examine the roles of psychological safety, psychological empowerment and other self-concepts to better understand the relationships investigated in this study. In addition, scholars should investigate the mediating roles of organizational phenomena such as communication processes, knowledge sharing and team climate to improve our understanding of other contextual resources likely to strengthen the impact of both exploitative and exploratory learning ambidexterity.

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