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LODJ
47,9

Received 24 January 2024
Revised 7 July 2024
14 December 2024
31 July 2025
27 November 2025
14 April 2026
24 July 2026
Accepted 18 September 2026

The impact of authentic leadership on organizational learning: mediating roles of organizational culture and knowledge sharing

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing upon social information processing theory, this research examines the impact of authentic leadership on organizational learning through the mediating roles of organizational culture and knowledge sharing.

Design/methodology/approach – Using purposive sampling, we targeted all senior managers of nonprofit sport organizations in Gilan Province, Iran. Of the 189 questionnaires distributed, 182 usable responses were retained for analysis. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling with SmartPLS 4.0.

Findings – Our findings provide evidence that authentic leadership has a significant positive effect on organizational learning, organizational culture and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, our study demonstrates that organizational culture and knowledge sharing serve as important mechanisms through which authentic leadership contributes to the development of organizational learning.

Practical implications – Nonprofit sport organizations should invest in targeted leadership development programs to strengthen authentic leadership capabilities among current and emerging leaders. Simultaneously, managers should cultivate transparent and collaborative organizational cultures that promote knowledge sharing through open communication and trust-based relationships. Together, these initiatives can enhance organizational learning and contribute to the long-term effectiveness of nonprofit sport organizations.

Originality/value – This article presents an integrated model explaining how authentic leadership influences organizational learning in the underexplored context of Iranian sports organizations.

Keywords Organizational learning, Authentic leadership, Organizational culture, Knowledge sharing

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Continuous change and renewal have fundamentally transformed the business environment (Raffaelli *et al.*, 2025). The increasing complexity associated with globalization and the uncertainties it creates have made it progressively more challenging for organizations to maintain competitiveness and ensure long-term survival in a highly volatile environment

Leadership & Organization Development Journal
Vol. 47 No. 9, 2026
pp. 152-179
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1472-5347
p-ISSN: 0143-7739
DOI 10.1108/LODJ-01-2024-0057

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(Atanassova *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, organizations must prioritize learning as a critical and sustainable source of competitive advantage to successfully navigate increasingly dynamic and rapidly changing markets (Baker *et al.*, 2022).

Organizational learning (OL) encompasses the processes through which organizations acquire, create, retain and transfer knowledge (Fiol and Lyles, 1985). It is a dynamic process that evolves from individual learning to organization-wide learning (Alerasoul *et al.*, 2022). Given its critical role in enhancing organizational performance and sustaining competitive advantage, it is important to identify the contextual factors, such as leadership, that facilitate the development of OL (Do and Mai, 2020).

Although a growing body of research has examined the effects of various leadership styles (e.g. transformational leadership) on OL, scholars have only recently begun to explore the unique role of authentic leadership (AL) as an antecedent of OL (e.g. Alneyadi and Cherian, 2025; Kim and Park, 2020). This limited attention is surprising, given that AL emphasizes the development of followers' positive psychological capacities and the cultivation of a moral climate (Gardner *et al.*, 2021) – factors that are particularly conductive to fostering OL, which fundamentally depends on employees' learning behaviors within the organization (Alerasoul *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, there remains considerable uncertainty regarding the mechanisms through which AL promotes OL, particularly whether these mechanisms operate independently or together (Syarif *et al.*, 2024). Addressing this gap responds to recent calls for research examining the mediating processes underlying the relationship between AL and OL (Mousa *et al.*, 2020).

We draw on social information processing (SIP) theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978) to empirically examine the mechanisms through which authentic leaders' behaviors influence OL. SIP theory explains how employees' attitudes, perceptions and behaviors are shaped by the social cues and information present in their work environment, with supervisors serving as a particularly influential source of such cues due to their hierarchical position and frequent interactions with employees (Ren *et al.*, 2024). Hence, we conceptualize authentic leaders' behaviors as salient social cues that facilitate employees' positive perceptions toward learning, strengthening OL. By fostering long-lasting relationships with followers to cultivate a deeper understanding of their strengths and weaknesses (i.e. self-awareness), enhancing appreciation for the strengths of others (i.e. ethical vision), demonstrating a willingness to receive feedback (i.e. balanced processing of information) and openly sharing their thoughts (i.e. relational transparency) (Gardner *et al.*, 2021), authentic leaders are a vital source of social information for followers. This perspective advances prior SIP theory scholarship (e.g. Schriesheim and Liu, 2018) by arguing that authentic leaders' behaviors are essential for facilitating knowledge sharing (KS), defined as the extent to which employees exchange task-related ideas, information and suggestions (Cao and Xiang, 2012), and organizational culture (OC), defined as the shared values and beliefs that guide behavior and differentiate one organization from another (Schein, 2010). Accordingly, in line with previous findings demonstrating positive relationships between OC, KS (Al-Dari *et al.*, 2021; Swift and Hwang, 2013) and OL, we propose that OC and KS function as complementary and sequential mechanisms through which AL promotes OL.

This research makes several contributions to existing literature. First, it uniquely examines the relationship between AL and OL by considering the mediating roles of OC and KS. In doing so, it extends previous research and responds to calls for further investigation into the relationship between AL and OL (Mousa *et al.*, 2020; Oh and Han, 2020). Second, by identifying both the distinct and sequential mediating roles of OC and KS, this study develops a more integrated explanatory framework for understanding how AL promotes OL. Third, drawing on SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), the study offers a novel theoretical explanation of how authentic leaders' behaviors serve as influential social cues that shape OC and KS behaviors, ultimately fostering OL. Fourth, despite growing interest in AL, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how AL influences OC and KS (Azanza *et al.*, 2013; Zeb *et al.*, 2020). This research helps address this gap by providing empirical evidence

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of these relationships within the context of nonprofit sport organizations (NPSOs), which exhibit unique cultural dynamics shaped by volunteer involvement, a mission-driven orientation and government influence (Hoye and Doherty, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2019). Finally, the findings extend sport management research by demonstrating how AL fosters OL through the complementary roles of OC and KS within NPSOs. In doing so, it responds to calls for further research examining the influence of OC (Al-Dari *et al.*, 2021; Chang *et al.*, 2021) and KS (Swift and Hwang, 2013) on OL.

Hypotheses development

Relating authentic leadership to organizational learning

AL is described "as a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008, p. 94). From this definition, AL is a multidimensional construct composed of four dimensions: (1) Self-awareness refers to "awareness of, and trust in, one's motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions" and "reflected self-image" (Kernis, 2003, p. 13), (2) Internalized moral perspective is the sense of right or wrong; it refers to the degree to which the leader sets a high standard for moral guides actions by internal moral standards and values, and expresses behaviors that are consistent with such internalized values (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008), (3) Balanced processing of information describes an idea whereby a leader objectively analyses all related information before coming to a decision (Gardner *et al.*, 2005) (4) Relational transparency is the degree to which the leader openly shares information needed to make decisions (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Gardner *et al.*, 2005).

Prior research on AL has consistently highlighted its positive influence on OL. For example, Alneyadi and Cherian (2025) found that AL is positively associated with OL, particularly when employees perceive strong institutional support, while Nawaz and Tian (2022) demonstrated that OL mediates the relationship between AL on project success. Although OL has been widely examined across diverse disciplines, no consensus has yet emerged regarding its definition. Broadly, OL refers to multilevel learning process involving interactions among individual, team and organizational levels (Kim, 1993). Argyris and Schön (1996, 1997) conceptualize OL as a process of inquiry through which individuals detect, and correct errors based on their underlying "theories-in-use." This process is initiated when individuals perceive discrepancies between expected and actual outcomes and respond by modifying their actions. Such learning may involve refining existing practices (single-loop learning) or fundamentally changing and transforming underlying assumptions, norms and organizational practices (double-loop learning). More broadly, OL has been conceptualized as a dynamic process through which improving organizations improve their actions and practices by learning from experience and by acquiring, developing and transferring knowledge (DiBella *et al.*, 1996; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Pérez López *et al.*, 2005).

Consistent with SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), we propose that authentic leaders convey powerful social cues that shape employees' collective perceptions of learning. Our argument is grounded in the premise that authentic leaders' behaviors serve as salient informational cues, providing employees with valuable insights into organizational values, expectations and behavioral norms, as well as the behaviors that are likely to be rewarded or discouraged (Boekhorst, 2015; Ostermeier *et al.*, 2023). Through their internalized moral perspective, authentic leaders provide salient social cues that learning behaviors are valued and that mistakes made during the learning process are viewed as opportunities for improvement rather than grounds for punishment. These cues foster an environment in which employees feel encouraged to voice their ideas and engage in continuous learning (Almutairi *et al.*, 2025; Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Hsiung, 2012; Rego *et al.*, 2012;

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Walumbwa *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, authentic leaders' self-awareness, reflected in their acknowledgment of both their strengths and limitations and their commitment to continuous personal growth (Gardner *et al.*, 2021), provides powerful social cues regarding the importance of learning and continuous development. These cues encourage employees to develop their own knowledge, skills and competencies, thereby strengthening OL. Furthermore, through relational transparency and balanced information processing, authentic leaders provide powerful social cues that emphasize the importance of delivering constructive feedback in a fair, honest, respectful and developmental manner (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Mazutis and Slawinski, 2008; Rego *et al.*, 2012). Such feedback provides "learners with insight for the purpose of correcting errors and enhancing learning" (Altmiller, 2012, p. 365). Consequently, employees perceive that error detection and correction are valued organizational practices and that openly discussing mistakes, exchanging feedback and engaging in continuous learning are expected workplace behaviors, thereby facilitating OL. On this basis, we put forward the first hypothesis:

H1. AL will positively and significantly impact OL.

Understanding how authentic leadership impacts knowledge-sharing

KS has increasingly been recognized as an important driver of organizational competitiveness, particularly in the knowledge-based economy (Foss *et al.*, 2009). To achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, organizations must effectively manage knowledge at different organizational levels (Han *et al.*, 2016; Cavazotte and Paula, 2025). KS is widely regarded as one of the key enablers of knowledge management practices (Souza *et al.*, 2020). The terms "knowledge sharing," "Knowledge transfer" and "knowledge flow" are often used interchangeably in the literature to describe the dissemination of organizationally relevant information, ideas, suggestions and expertise across organizational levels through various communication channels (Cao and Xiang, 2012; Castaneda and Cuellar, 2020; Lee, 2001). Similarly, Ipe and Wagner (2008) define KS as the process of making knowledge available to others. Prior research has shown that leadership, employee characteristics and environmental factors influence employees' willingness to share knowledge (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2026; Souza *et al.*, 2020).

Empirical evidence supports the positive role of AL in promoting employees' KS behavior. For example, Zhang *et al.* (2023) found that authentic leaders cultivate reciprocal norms and mutual trust, which facilitate KS. Similarly, Yasin *et al.* (2024) showed that AL strengthen employees' social ties, thereby promoting KS. More recently, Cavazotte and Paula (2025) demonstrated that authentic leaders encourage followers' KS both directly and indirectly by fostering followers' psychological empowerment. Likewise, Alneyadi and Cherian (2025) reported that AL promotes KS behaviors among staff members in higher education institutions.

Building on SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), we argue that the prominent social cues conveyed through four behavioral patterns of authentic leaders enhance employees' KS behaviors for four reasons. First, the relational transparency of authentic leaders signals that openness, honest communication and the genuine expression of thoughts and feelings are valued workplace behaviors (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Gill and Caza, 2018), thereby enhancing employees' access to task-relevant information and increasing their willingness to share knowledge with others. Second, through self-awareness, authentic leaders provide salient social cues that encourage employees to reflect on their own strengths and limitations, seek constructive feedback from colleagues and engage in reciprocal learning (Li and Peng, 2026), thereby strengthening their willingness to exchange ideas and share task-relevant knowledge. Third, through balanced information processing, authentic leaders provide salient social cues that encourage employees to openly share information and ideas, consider diverse viewpoints and exchange constructive feedback based on colleagues' expertise, thereby strengthening

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KS. Fourth, authentic leaders' internalized moral perspective, reflected in their consistent adherence to ethical values and standards (Gardner *et al.*, 2021), provides powerful social cues regarding the importance of collaboration, mutual support and ethical conduct. As a result, employees who perceive these social cues are more likely to assist their colleagues by sharing task-relevant information and expertise, thereby strengthening KS. On this basis, we put forward the second hypothesis:

H2. AL will positively and significantly influence KS.

Relating authentic leadership to organizational culture

OC is defined as "the set of key values, assumptions, understandings and norms that is shared by members of an organization and taught to new members as correct" (Daft, 2005, p. 422). This definition aligns with Schein's (1996, 2010) characterization of culture as a pattern of shared assumptions within a group. It is also often described as the social or normative glue that holds the organization together (Smircich, 1983).

NPSOs, the context of this study, possess an OC that differs from that of most other organizations, largely because of their reliance on a volunteer workforce. This creates an additional and distinctive subculture (Southall *et al.*, 2003; Colyer, 2000). While volunteers constitute the backbone of these organizations and contribute to a more participatory and collaborative culture, their presence can also create organizational challenges (Hoye and Doherty, 2011). For example, Colyer (2000) identified tensions between volunteers, who tend to preserve existing structures and control, and paid employees, who often advocate for greater professionalism. Sport organizations also exhibit distinctive cultural characteristics, including rituals, tradition and symbols, which are widely perceived as legitimate and emphasize the subordination of individual interests to the collective good of the team (Smith and Shilbury, 2004). Another prominent characteristic highlighted in the literature is male dominance, which contributes to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions within the sport system (Maitland *et al.*, 2015; Pfister and Radtke, 2009). These distinctive cultural characteristics underscore the importance of leadership in fostering an OC characterized by open communication, transparency, collaboration and inclusivity among both professional staff and volunteers. Existing research provides evidence of a positive relationship between AL and OC in other sectors, including tourism, education and healthcare (Alneyadi and Cherian, 2025; Azanza *et al.*, 2013; Alkharabsheh and Alias, 2018; Hoang *et al.*, 2025).

Drawing on SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), we argue that authentic leaders shape OC by displaying behaviors that provide social information cues regarding the norms and values expected within the organization. Employees use these cues to interpret organizational norms and to understand which behaviors are valued or expected. By remaining true to their core values and striving to create long-term value for the organization (Almutairi *et al.*, 2025; Gardner *et al.*, 2021; Ostermeier *et al.*, 2023), authentic leaders foster shared beliefs among employees regarding the behaviors that are rewarded or discouraged. Authentic leaders also embody values of fairness, openness and inclusion in their interactions with followers (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Moreover, authentic leader–employee relationships develop through the sharing of core values and goals that guide behavior (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Yammarino *et al.* (2008) argue that authentic leaders cultivate "shared mental models", which strengthen employees' commitment to collective values. As employees interpret leaders' behaviors as social cues signaling what is expected within the organization, they internalize these values and norms and are more likely to align their own behaviors accordingly (Gardner *et al.*, 2005; Azanza *et al.*, 2013). Over time, this alignment contributes to the development of an OC grounded in the principles of AL (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). On this basis, we put forward the third hypothesis:

H3. AL will positively and significantly impact OC.

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Understanding the relationship between organizational culture and organizational learning

Given that OC shapes how individuals perceive, think, feel, evaluate and behave, and that OL is fundamentally rooted in interaction among employees (Meher and Mishra, 2022; Schein, 1996), prior research consistently demonstrates that organizational values and norms, core components of OC, are key drivers of OL, influencing both the nature of learning and how it unfolds within organizations (e.g. Oh and Han, 2020; Sanz-Valle *et al.*, 2011; Shahriari and Allameh, 2020).

OL becomes embedded in shared norms, routines and practices (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Oh and Han, 2020). In this regard, OC facilitates collective learning by shaping how employees exchange knowledge and experiences through ongoing social interactions (Oyemomi *et al.*, 2019). In other words, OC serves as the social context through which individual learning becomes embedded in collective routines and organizational practices, thereby facilitating OL (Oh and Han, 2020). For instance, Molodchik and Jardon (2015) argue that OC enhances OL by promoting collective values that support continuous learning. Likewise, Syarif *et al.* (2024) provide empirical evidence that strong organizational cultural norms play a crucial role in strengthening an OL capacity.

A supportive OC further enables employees to contribute to collective learning by fostering open communication, collaboration and psychological safety (Yoon *et al.*, 2010; Tripathi and Kalia, 2024). For example, a clan culture, characterized by mutual trust, a sense of belonging and cooperation among organizational members, has been shown to promote OL by encouraging debate and dialogue across multiple organizational levels (Lopez *et al.*, 2004; Oh and Han, 2020). The influence of OC is particularly salient in the mission-driven context of NPSOs, where collaboration and shared responsibility are strongly emphasized. These cultural characterizes foster an environment conducive to open communication and collective sense-making, both of which are fundamental mechanisms underpinning OL (Dousti *et al.*, 2013; Shamshirian and Halldorsson, 2025; Zargar and Rynne, 2023). Such learning is particularly important for NPSOs, given the pressure they face in attracting members and resources, as well as the need to differentiate themselves from commercial sport providers (Delshab *et al.*, 2022). On this basis, we put forward the fourth hypothesis:

H4. OC will positively and significantly impact OL.

Relating organizational culture to knowledge sharing

Previous research has shown that OC plays a key role in shaping KS (e.g. Chión *et al.*, 2020; Islam *et al.*, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2016). David and Fahey (2000) argue that cultural characteristics influence the context of social interactions and, consequently, shape how individuals manage and share knowledge. Islam *et al.* (2015) identify three key cultural dimensions that facilitate KS: collaboration among employees, a strong emphasis on learning and development, and top management support. Similarly, Tseng (2017) found that cultural values and norms enhance the credibility and perceived importance of KS, thereby increasing employees' willingness to engage in knowledge exchange. Borges (2013) further demonstrated that these cultural values act as a unifying force within the organization by fostering trust-based relationships and social networks that facilitate KS. More recently, Azeem *et al.* (2021) provided empirical evidence that the core values embedded in an organization's culture positively influence employees' KS behaviors. The underlying mechanism linking OC to KS lies in the development of a shared sense of purpose, which brings individuals together to address common challenges through the exchange of ideas and information (Lee, 2001). In the context of sport organizations, particularly NPSOs, collective participation and shared cultural norms that promote community orientation and social responsibility facilitate KS among both professional staff and volunteers (Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Shamshirian and Halldorsson, 2025). Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

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H5. OC will positively and significantly impact KS.

Identifying the links between knowledge sharing and organizational learning

KS is central to OL (Gharajeh-Alamdari *et al.*, 2025; Dorta-Afonso *et al.*, 2024) and represents a fundamental component of knowledge management. In sport organizations, knowledge management encompasses the processes of acquiring, creating, sorting, sharing and applying knowledge (Delshab *et al.*, 2019). KS involves the exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge, experience and expertise among employees (Kim and Park, 2020), whereas OL refers to the process through which organizations identify and correct errors and improve performance by transforming shared knowledge into collective learning (Fiol and Lyles, 1985). As Senge (1990, p. 139) emphasizes, "organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning, but without it no organizational learning occurs". Within organizational contexts, collaboration, dialogue, discussion and sharing of experience are essential for transforming individual learning into group and organizational-level learning (Kumaraswamy and Chitale, 2012).

By fostering collaboration and creating opportunities for employees to seek advice, exchange insights and learn from one another, organizations encourage KS behaviors that promote OL (Park and Kim, 2018). When employees share task-related knowledge, skills and expertise with their colleagues, they facilitate the development of innovative ideas while supporting continuous learning (Le and Tuyen, 2025). KS and OL are particularly important for NPSOs, as they enhance operational effectiveness, reduce the likelihood of repeating past mistakes, strengthen organizational competitiveness and improve organizations' capacity to respond to the evolving demands of diverse sports markets (Delshab *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, we expect that effective KS will enhance OL. On this basis, we propose the following hypothesis:

H6. KS will positively and significantly impact OL.

Mediating role of organizational culture in the relationship between authentic leadership and organizational learning

Based on SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), we propose that authentic leaders serve as influential social cues that emphasize the importance of authenticity within the workplace, thereby shaping organizational cultural norms and values (Hypothesis 3). Through the consistent demonstration of these values and norms, authentic leaders signal to employees that learning behaviors are valued and encouraged. As employees perceive these behaviors to be culturally endorsed, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that facilitate OL (Hypothesis 4). Accordingly, we propose that OC mediates the relationship between AL and OL. Based on this, we put forward the seventh hypothesis:

H7. OC will positively and significantly mediate the relationship between AL and OL.

Mediating role of knowledge sharing in the relationship between authentic leadership and organizational learning

KS has been identified as a key mechanism linking leadership to broader organizational outcomes (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 2024). AL has been recognized as an effective leadership style that fosters an environment of psychological safety, promotes high ethical standards and creates opportunities to contribute to shared organizational goals (Khan and Ghayas, 2022; Lee *et al.*, 2026; Zeb *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, authentic leaders who communicate openly and share their expertise provide salient social cues that signal the value of exchanging information and ideas. In line with SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), these cues shape employees' perceptions of appropriate workplace behavior, thereby encouraging KS.

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In turn, KS fostered by authentic leaders enhances employees' motivation to actively engage in learning behaviors, either by addressing key barriers to learning and supporting the development of essential skills and shared mental models (Dorta-Afonso *et al.*, 2024). Given the evidence that AL promotes KS (Hypothesis 2) and that KS facilitates OL (Hypothesis 6), we propose that KS serves as a key mechanism through which AL indirectly promotes OL. Based on this, we put forward the eighth hypothesis:

H8. KS will positively and significantly mediate the relationship between AL and OL.

A sequential mediation mechanism

We propose that OC and KS function as sequential mediators linking AL to OL. Dorta-Afonso *et al.* (2024) argue that learning occurs through KS, whereby employees exchange insights gained through reflecting on their personal experiences. These individual learning experiences form the foundation of OL (Alerasoul *et al.*, 2022), which occurs when individuals generate knowledge and share it with others throughout the organization (Fiol and Lyles, 1985). Therefore, we argue that KS is positively associated with individual learning, which, in turn, promotes OL. Prior research (e.g. Shao *et al.*, 2012; Tasneem and Quresh, 2020) also suggests that cultural values serve as interconnected mechanisms through which leadership influences KS. Specifically, AL provides important social cues that foster enduring ethical values and norms within OC. These culturally embedded values, in turn, encourage employees to engage in KS, ultimately strengthening OL. Based on this, we put forward the ninth hypothesis:

H9. OC and KS will sequentially mediate the positive relationship between AL and OL.

Methods

Sample and study context

This study obtained ethical approval for human research from La Trobe University. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed that they could decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All responses were collected anonymously and treated confidentially, with only aggregated data reported in publications. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of La Trobe University and the principles governing research involving human participants.

Guided by a positivist epistemology, this study employs a deductive, hypothesis-driven research design. We developed *a priori* hypotheses and rigorously tested the proposed conceptual model using quantitative data and appropriate statistical techniques to enable objective inference (Antonakis *et al.*, 2010).

The study sample consisted of full-time employees working in NPSOs in Gilan Province, Iran, who held executive or senior managerial positions (e.g. executive managers and second- or third-tier managers). Iran's nonprofit sport sector includes organizations such as the Association of Non-Governmental Sport Organizations, which was established to support the rights and interests of NPSOs. The OC of the Iranian NPSOs is characterized by a strong emphasis on social welfare and community engagement rather than commercial objectives. This culture is shaped by social norms, volunteer involvement and mission-driven goals centered on collective participation and social responsibility, as well as shared ethical values. It is also significantly influenced by the Ministry of Sport and Youth, which plays a central role in regulating and funding sport organizations (Dousti *et al.*, 2013; Shamshirian and Halldorsson, 2025; Zargar and Rynne, 2023). Furthermore, organizational practices such as KS, learning and innovation are increasingly recognized as key drivers of organizational performance in Iranian NPSOs (Delshab *et al.*, 2022).

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This purposive sampling technique aligns the selected participants with the study's theoretical focus on OL as an outcome shaped by leadership and OC. It also enhances construct validity by drawing on knowledgeable respondents (i.e. senior managers) and strengthens theoretical alignment and cross-level coherence (Hitt *et al.*, 2007). Accordingly, these participants are well-positioned to enact and observe AL and to shape OC and KS systems that facilitate OL.

Prior research has highlighted the importance of examining AL in high power-distance contexts such as Iran (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). In societies where unequal distribution of power is widely accepted (Hofstede, 1980), authentic leaders' behaviors may be particularly influential because they are relatively uncommon. This is especially relevant in Iranian sport organizations, where individuals in positions of authority are typically appointed by political actors rather than selected through merit-based processes (Delshab *et al.*, 2019).

The invitation to participate was facilitated by the human resource department of the respective organizations. All participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study and invited to provide informed consent before participation.

We employed a total population purposive sampling strategy (Levy and Lemeshow, 2008). A total of 189 paper-and-pencil questionnaires were distributed to all eligible senior managers, of which 186 were returned, yielding a response rate of 98%. Four questionnaires were excluded because of missing or unusable data, resulting in a final sample of 182 useable responses, which is appropriate for PLS-SEM (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section collected respondents' demographic characteristics, including gender, age and work experience. Of the 182 respondents, 71 (39.01%) were female and 111 (60.99%) were male. In terms of work experience, 24 respondents (13.19%) had 1–5 years, 48 (26.37%) had 6–10 years, 69 (37.91%) had 11–15 years and 41 (22.53%) had more than 15 years. Regarding age, 54 respondents (29.67%) were younger than 30, 67 (36.81%) were 31–40, 28 (15.38%) were 41–50 and 33 (18.14%) were older than 50.

Measures

The second section of the questionnaire (see Table 1) presents the 22 items used to measure the study constructs. A panel of three experts translated the questionnaire from English into Farsi using a back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). After reaching consensus on the initial translation, two bilingual experts independently back-translated the Farsi version into English. The back-translated version closely corresponded to the original questionnaire, with only minor revisions required to produce the final Farsi scale. The content validity of the questionnaire was subsequently evaluated and confirmed by academic experts in the relevant field (Hair *et al.*, 2017). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Authentic leadership

AL was measured using eight items adapted from the scale developed by Walumbwa *et al.* (2008). The original instrument comprises 16 items representing four dimensions of AL. To preserve the breadth of the construct while minimizing respondent burden, we retained two items from each dimension, resulting in an eight-item short form. This content-equated scale reduction followed best-practice recommendations for scale shortening, whereby items are removed proportionately from each dimension to preserve content validity and theoretical coverage (Hinkin, 1998). Items were selected based on (1) expert review, content validity indexing and assessments of clarity and representativeness; (2) cognitive interviews to establish face validity and respondent understanding and (3) pilot testing to examine psychometric properties. As shown in Table 1, the resulting scale demonstrates satisfactory reliability, and the use of a shortened version of the questionnaire developed by Walumbwa *et al.* (2008) is consistent with prior research (e.g. Hadiannasab and Afshari, 2019). The Cronbach's alpha was 0.86. The final eight items are reported in Table 1.

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Table 1. Factor loading, VIF, AVE, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, R^2 and Q^2

Construct	Item	Factor loading	VIF	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	R^2	Q^2
Organizational learning	1. We promote risk-taking and experimentation in our working methods	0.754	2.487	0.568	0.853	0.887	0.631	0.073
	2. We do have set working practices, but we can change these in pursuit of greater efficiency if need be	0.755						
	3. We actively encourage employees and customers to let us know if we are going wrong in the way we do things and to let us know how we can improve	0.705						
	4. There is two-way communication between employees of all levels about what this company is doing and where it is going	0.751						
	5. Ideas from all employees are listened to and acted on to change company policy, even if they challenge the senior manager's views	0.734						
	6. This is an open organization, and as much information as possible is made available to employees	0.816						
Authentic leadership	7. Seeks feedback to improve interactions with others	0.613	2.238	0.511	0.862	0.892	NA	NA
	8. Accurately describes how others view their capabilities	0.760						
	9. Says exactly what they mean	0.658						
	10. Is willing to admit mistakes when they are made	0.806						
	11. Demonstrates beliefs that are consistent with actions	0.771						
	12. Makes decisions based on their core beliefs	0.737						
	13. Solicits views that challenge their deeply held positions	0.650						
	14. Listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions	0.699						
Knowledge sharing	15. I usually share my work experience with colleagues and collaborators	0.852	2.181	0.689	0.848	0.898	0.486	0.238
	16. When I receive new information, I would share it with my collaborators	0.894						
	17. I usually express my views and suggestions when attending team discussions freely	0.883						
	18. I usually share my work documents and material when collaborators are in need	0.734						
Organizational culture	19. The majority of my organization's employees are extensively involved with their work	0.712	1.440	0.517	0.700	0.811	0.364	0.176
	20. If an employee ignores the organization's fundamental values, they will be in trouble	0.767						
	21. Everyone in the organization has a deep understanding of the needs of their clients	0.692						
	22. Our organization has a clear strategy for the future	0.702						

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Organizational learning
OL was assessed using six items adapted from Swift and Hwang (2013). A sample item is "We promote risk-taking and experimentation in our working methods" ($\alpha = 0.78$).

Knowledge sharing
We used four items developed by Cao and Xiang (2012) to measure KS. An example is "I usually express my views and suggestions when attending team discussions freely" ($\alpha = 0.82$).

Organizational culture
OC was assessed using four items from Denison (2012). A sample item is "Our organization has a clear strategy for the future" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Common method bias
Common method bias can arise in studies relying on cross-sectional and self-report methodologies (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To address this concern, we employed both procedural and statistical remedies. Procedurally, we implemented three strategies. First, we assured participants of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Second, we provided clear explanations and clarifications for all survey items to minimize ambiguity. Third, we randomized the order of questionnaire items to reduce response bias. These procedural remedies are consistent with established recommendations for mitigating the potential effects of common method bias in survey research (Tehseen *et al.*, 2017). Statistically, we first conducted Harman's single-factor test to assess the potential presence of common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The findings from Harman's single-factor test indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for 37.66% of the total variance. As this value falls below the recommended 50% cutoff, the results suggest that common method bias is not a significant concern (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). Additionally, as shown in Table 1, all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below the recommended threshold of 3.30, providing further evidence that common method bias was not a significant concern in this study (Kock, 2015).

Data analysis
We used the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses. PLS-SEM was selected for several reasons. First, it is well suited to studies with relatively small sample sizes ($n < 250$; Hair *et al.*, 2019). Second, PLS-SEM is robust to violations of data normality assumptions (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Third, it is particularly appropriate for exploratory research and for testing theoretical models that have not been extensively examined (Henseler *et al.*, 2009).

Results

PLS-SEM consists of two main steps: (1) measurement model and (2) structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

Measurement model
The measurement model assesses the relationship between latent constructs and their corresponding observed indicators (Ringle *et al.*, 2012). According to Hair *et al.* (2019), the measurement model should be evaluated based on three criteria: (1) item reliability assessed using factor loading, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability; (2) convergent validity assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE) and (3) discriminant validity evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio.

As presented in Table 1, the results indicate satisfactory measurement reliability. All factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.40 (Hulland, 1999), supporting item

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reliability. In addition, both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values were above the recommended cutoff of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2019; Cronbach, 1951), indicating satisfactory internal consistency (see Figure 1).

Convergent validity was assessed using AVE. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), an AVE value of 0.50 or higher indicates satisfactory convergent validity. As shown in Table 1, all AVE values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.50, providing evidence of satisfactory convergent validity.

Discriminant validity indicates that each construct should exhibit stronger associations with its own indicators than with those of other constructs (Ringle *et al.*, 2012). We assessed the discriminant validity of the measurement model using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT. First, according to Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity is assessed using a matrix in which the diagonal elements represent the square roots of the AVE for each construct, whereas the off-diagonal elements represent the inter-construct correlations. The square root of the AVE for each construct should exceed its corresponding inter-construct correlations. As presented in Table 2, the square roots of the AVE for all constructs exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations, confirming satisfactory discriminant validity. Second, Hair *et al.* (2017) define HTMT as the "ratio of the between-trait correlations to the

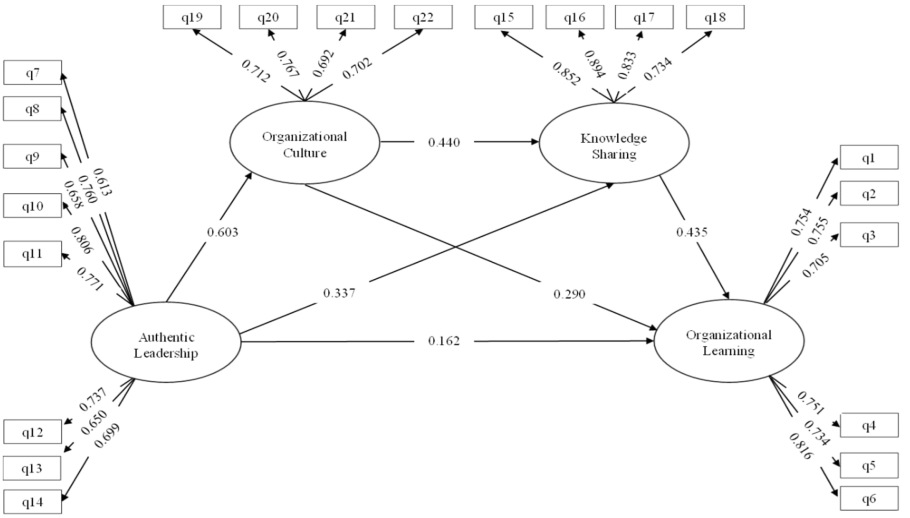


Figure 1. Structural model in standardized coefficients mode. **Source:** Authors' own work

Table 2. Discriminant validity assessment: Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT

Construct	Mean	SD	Authentic leadership	Knowledge sharing	Organizational culture	Organizational learning
Authentic leadership	2.767	0.945	*0.715*	0.695	0.749	0.682
Knowledge sharing	2.709	0.989	0.602	*0.831*	0.789	0.808
Organizational culture	2.545	1.177	0.604	0.639	*0.720*	0.769
Organizational learning	3.697	0.991	0.610	0.737	0.677	*0.753*

Note(s): Italicized values represent the square roots of AVE for each construct; lower triangular elements represent the Fornell–Larcker criterion; upper triangular elements represent the HTMT values

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within-trait correlations" (p. 118). As shown in Table 2, the HTMT values ranged from 0.682 to 0.808, all falling below the recommended cutoff value of 0.85, thereby providing further evidence of satisfactory discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

Structural model

According to Henseler *et al.* (2009), the structural model is evaluated by examining the significance of the path coefficients and the coefficient of determination R^2, predictive relevance Q^2 and effect size f^2. The significance of the path coefficients was assessed using the bootstrapping procedure. As shown in Figure 2, all *T*-value exceeded the recommended threshold of 1.96, indicating that the hypothesized relationships are statistically significant at a 95% confidence level (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

According to Hair *et al.* (2019), R^2 values of 0.19, 0.33 and 0.67 indicate weak, medium and substantial explanatory power, respectively. As shown in Table 1, the R^2 values for the model's endogenous variables (i.e. KS, OC and OL) all exceeded the threshold of 0.33, indicating at least moderate explanatory power. These findings suggest that the structural model demonstrates satisfactory explanatory capability.

Another criterion used to evaluate the structural model is Q^2, which assesses the model's predictive relevance (Hair *et al.*, 2019). According to Henseler *et al.* (2009), Q^2 values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 indicate small, medium and large predictive relevance, respectively. As shown in Table 1, all Q^2 values exceed the threshold 0.02, indicating that the model demonstrates satisfactory predictive relevance.

We also calculated the effect size f^2 to evaluate the relative contribution of each exogenous construct to the explained variance of the endogenous constructs in the structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2020). According to Cumming *et al.* (2011), f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 were interpreted as indicating small, medium and large effect sizes, respectively. As reported in Table 3, all f^2 values exceeded the minimum recommended value of 0.02, indicating that each exogenous construct exerted at least a small effect on its corresponding endogenous construct (Hair *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, we evaluated the model's overall fit using the goodness of fit (GoF) index (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Following the guidelines proposed by Wetzels *et al.* (2009), GoF values of

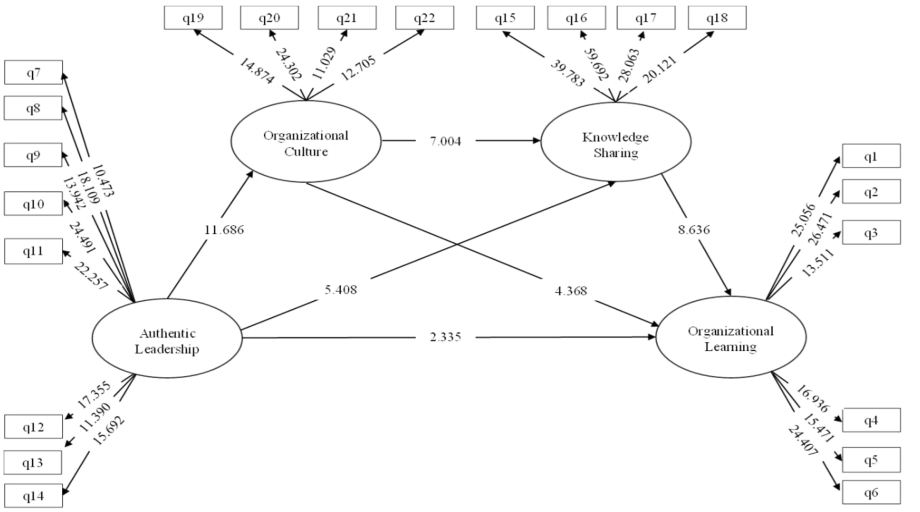


Figure 2. Structural model in *T*-value mode. **Source:** Authors' own work

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Table 3. The results of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Direct β	*T*-value	*P*-value	f^2	Result
1. AL will positively and significantly impact OL	0.162	2.335	0.000	0.090	Supported
2. AL will positively and significantly influence KS	0.337	5.408	0.000	0.181	Supported
3. AL will positively and significantly impact OC	0.603	11.686	0.000	0.572	Supported
4. OC will positively and significantly impact OL	0.290	4.368	0.000	0.157	Supported
5. OC will positively and significantly impact KS	0.440	7.004	0.000	0.239	Supported
6. KS will positively and significantly impact OL	0.435	8.636	0.000	0.286	Supported

Source(s): Authors' own work

0.10, 0.25 and 0.36 indicate small, medium and large overall model fit, respectively. The GoF value obtained in this study was 0.509, indicating a strong overall model fit.

$$GOF = \sqrt{\overline{Communalities} \times \overline{R^2}} = \sqrt{0.572 \times 0.452} = 0.509$$

Direct effects

Table 3 presents the results of the direct effects. Our findings supported Hypothesis 1, indicating a positive influence of AL on OL (β = 0.162, T = 2.335, p = 0.018). Similarly, Hypothesis 2 (AL positively influences KS: β = 0.337, T = 5.408, p = 0.000) and Hypothesis 3 (AL positively influences OC: β = 0.603, T = 11.686, p = 0.000) were confirmed. Furthermore, Hypotheses 4 and 5 were supported, revealing that OC has a positive effect on both OL (β = 0.290, T = 4.368, p = 0.000) and KS (β = 0.440, T = 7.004, p = 0.000). Moreover, Hypothesis 6 indicated a significant effect of KS on OL (β = 0.435, T = 8.636, p = 0.000). The research's path coefficients (β) and T-values are shown in Table 3 and illustrated in Figure 3.

Indirect effects

Table 4 presents the indirect and sequential mediation effects identified in our study. The findings support Hypothesis 7, indicating that OC mediates the relationship between AL and OL, with (β = 0.175, T-Value = 4.209, p = 0.000). Furthermore, when KS functions as a mediator, AL significantly impacts OL, with (β = 0.153, T-value = 4.780, p = 0.000), supporting Hypothesis 8. Furthermore, the serial mediation analysis reveals that OC and KS mediate the relationship between AL and OL. The indirect pathway (AL → OC → KS → OL) is significantly positive, with (β = 0.120, T-Value = 5.387, p = 0.000), confirming the combined roles of OC and KS as a serial mediator and supporting Hypothesis 9 (see Table 4).

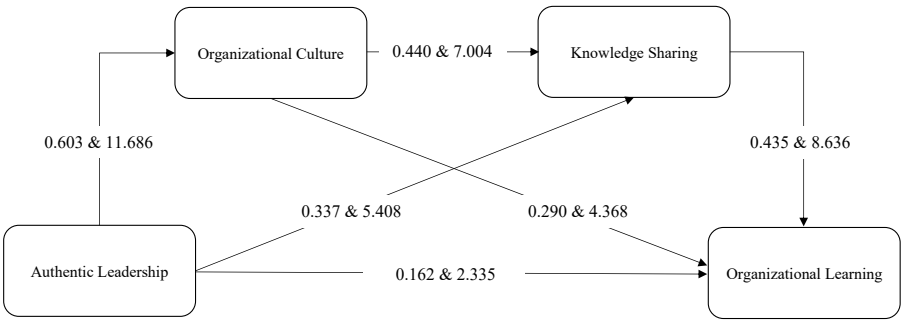


Figure 3. The model after adding mediators. **Source:** Authors' own work

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Table 4. Sequential mediation and indirect effects

Hypotheses	Indirect β	*T*-value	*P*-value	Result
7. OC will positively and significantly mediate the relationship between AL and OL	0.175	4.209	0.000	Supported
8. KS will positively and significantly mediate the relationship between AL and OL	0.153	4.780	0.000	Supported
9. OC and KS will positively and significantly mediate the relationship between AL and OL	0.120	5.387	0.000	Supported

Source(s): Authors' own work

Discussion

By integrating SIP theory with AL research, this study explains how OC and KS jointly transmit the effects of AL on OL within NPSOs. The findings indicate that when employees perceive their leaders as authentic – acting in accordance with their internalized values, encouraging transparency and open dialogue, and engaging in balanced information processing and collective decision-making – these behaviors serve as salient social cues that shape employees' attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, AL fosters employees' engagement in OL, enhances their willingness to share knowledge and ideas, and contributes to the development of a supportive OC. These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating the positive influence of AL on employee and organizational outcomes (e.g. Alneyadi and Cherian, 2025; Li and Peng, 2026; Cavazotte and Paula, 2025; Yasin *et al.*, 2024). More importantly, this study extends the literature on AL by highlighting its relevance in the underexplored context of NPSOs, where collaboration, shared values and continuous learning are essential for organizational sustainability and performance (Carlos Pinho *et al.*, 2014; Delshab *et al.*, 2021).

The findings further demonstrate that OC and KS are important mechanisms through which AL promotes OL. Consistent with SIP theory, AL creates a social environment that shapes employees' perceptions of appropriate norms and behaviors. By modeling openness, integrity and participative decision-making, authentic leaders cultivate a culture characterized by trust, collaboration and shared values. Such a culture encourages employees to share knowledge and experiences, thereby strengthening OL. These findings align with previous research identifying OC as a critical determinant of success in NPSOs (Carlos Pinho *et al.*, 2014; Maitland *et al.*, 2015) and KS as a key driver of OL and organizational effectiveness in nonprofit settings (Tuan, 2020; Werner and Dickson, 2018).

In addition, the findings provide evidence that AL enhances OL through a sequential mechanism whereby it cultivates a supportive OC, which subsequently promotes KS. This sequential pathway offers a more nuanced understanding of how AL translates into OL. Rather than influencing OL directly, authentic leaders cultivate a value-based and psychologically safe OC that encourages employees' KS behaviors, ultimately fostering OL. By identifying these sequential mechanisms, our research responds to recent calls for research examining the processes through which AL promotes OL (e.g. Alzyoud *et al.*, 2026; Alneyadi and Cherian, 2025; Mousa *et al.*, 2020).

Theoretical implications

This research makes several significant contributions to leadership, OL and sport management literature. First, the findings extend AL literature by providing a deeper understanding of how authentic leaders promote OL, particularly within NPSOs. Although AL has attracted increasing scholarly attention, relatively little research has examined its relationship with OL (e.g. Mousa *et al.*, 2020; Syarif *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, our understanding of how AL promotes OL remains underdeveloped. Our findings not only corroborate recent evidence that

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AL positively influences OL (Alneyadi and Cherian, 2025; Nawaz and Tian, 2022) but also extend the existing literature by uncovering the underlying mechanisms through which AL facilitates OL. Specifically, it demonstrates that the combined influence of OC (i.e. shared assumptions, beliefs and expectations) and KS (i.e. the voluntary exchange of expertise and experience for the benefit of others) helps explain how AL facilitates OL. Our findings also contribute to the growing body of research highlighting the importance of aligning organizational cultural values with initiatives that encourage employees to share knowledge (Azeem *et al.*, 2021; Iqbal *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, the findings open promising avenues for further research to examine the effectiveness of other leadership styles (e.g. inclusive leadership) in fostering cultures of KS and OL, particularly within competitive and male-dominated sport contexts (Burton, 2019; Spaaij *et al.*, 2018).

Second, by identifying OC and KS as key mechanisms linking AL to OL, this study integrates previously fragmented yet growing streams of research across these domains. Previous studies have examined OC and KS as outcomes of AL (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2026; Yasin *et al.*, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2023) and as antecedents of OL (e.g. Le and Tuyen, 2025; Syarif *et al.*, 2024), while other research has demonstrated that AL predicts learning-related outcomes (Mousa *et al.*, 2020). However, literature has lacked a comprehensive framework that integrates these relationships into a coherent explanatory model. By addressing this gap, our findings not only corroborate previous studies but also demonstrate the dual role of KS, as both a mediator between AL and OL and as the mechanism through which OC facilitates OL. Most prior research has examined the direct or separate mediating effect of OC and KS on OL (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2026; Meher and Mishra, 2022). By empirically testing both the distinct and sequential mediating roles of OC and KS, this study advances theoretical integration across leadership and OL literature and opens new avenues for examining the dynamic interplay in explaining the relationship between AL and OL. Given the importance of contextual factors in shaping the influence of authentic leaders' influence on KS and OL (Alneyadi and Cherian, 2025; Lee *et al.*, 2026), this integrated model also raises important questions regarding whether contextual and individual differences influence the strength and sequencing of these mediating mechanisms across for-profit and nonprofit sport settings.

Third, the findings of this study contribute to sport management literature by responding to calls for further research examining which leadership styles most effectively foster KS and OL in sport settings (Megheirkouni, 2017). Although previous research has examined AL in sport contexts, primarily linking it to outcomes, such as trust, affective commitment and psychological capital (e.g. Bandura and Kavussanu, 2018; Mansouri *et al.*, 2024), limited attention has been devoted to its role in promoting OL. Furthermore, our findings highlight the pivotal role of AL in cultivating a collective OC. In doing so, the study positions AL as a promising pathway for addressing long-standing challenges related to inclusivity within sport organizations by fostering shared values, collaboration and learning-oriented organizational environments (Burton, 2019; Delshab *et al.*, 2021; Spaaij *et al.*, 2020). By highlighting the central role of OC as an antecedent of both KS and OL in NPSOs, this study contributes to the growing body of research examining the role of OC in sport organizations (Kaiser *et al.*, 2009; Schroeder, 2010; Carlos Pinho *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the role of KS as a key mechanism for enhancing OL and creating competitive advantage in NPSOs remains underexplored (Delshab *et al.*, 2021; Tuan, 2020; Werner and Dickson, 2018). Given the growing importance of knowledge management and OL in enabling NPSOs to respond to the evolving sport environment (Wemmer *et al.*, 2016), the findings of this study contribute to the sport management literature by emphasizing the importance of strengthening NPSOs' capacity for KS and OL through AL practices (Allameh *et al.*, 2014).

Finally, drawing on SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), we provide novel insights into the effects of AL, particularly its influence on OL. While previous research has primarily relied on social learning theory and social exchange theory to explain the effects of AL (Alneyadi and Cherian, 2025; Gardner *et al.*, 2024), this study adopts a different theoretical perspective to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how AL operates within the

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underexplored context of Iranian NPSOs. Consistent with SIP theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), we argue that leaders' behaviors serve as influential social cues that shape employees' interpretations, attitudes and behaviors, ultimately influencing organizational outcomes. Authentic leaders communicate through their behaviors that transparency, integrity and ethical conduct are valued within the organization. Through this SIP mechanism, employees align their own values and behaviors with shared organizational norms. These norms, in turn, shape employees' perceptions of appropriate workplace behavior, encourage KS and ultimately foster OL.

Practical implications

Our study offers several practical implications for practitioners, policymakers and organizational leaders, particularly in NPSOs. First, our findings demonstrate that authentic leaders play a pivotal role in promoting OL. Accordingly, NPSOs should prioritize behavioral authenticity by fostering transparent communication during routine team interactions, performance discussions and organizational meetings while ensuring that leaders' decisions consistently reflect their values (Gardner *et al.*, 2021; Ostermeier *et al.*, 2023). Such authentic behaviors are particularly important in nonprofit organizations, where organizational missions, community contributions and social responsibility are central to stakeholders' expectations (Delshab *et al.*, 2022). Although recruitment and selection processes are important for identifying individuals with AL potential through survey-based assessments, experiential learning and scenario-based exercises, many leaders already employed in nonprofit organizations require developmental support (Boekhorst, 2015). Therefore, organizations should invest in targeted leadership development programs and training initiatives to strengthen AL capabilities among current and emerging leaders. In addition, AL development interventions should be designed to create developmental trigger events that encourage leaders to reflect on their behaviors and facilitate meaningful changes in their leadership practices (Boekhorst, 2015; Cooper *et al.*, 2005).

Second, the findings suggest that AL promotes OL by encouraging employees to share knowledge. Accordingly, managers should focus on creating structured opportunities for knowledge exchange, such as post-event debriefing sessions, cross-functional learning circles, mentoring initiatives and communities of practice within sport organizations. These mechanisms can be particularly effective in nonprofit sport settings, where financial and human resources are often limited, yet collective learning is essential for organizational effectiveness and long-term sustainability (Delshab *et al.*, 2022). Importantly, leaders should frame mistakes and setbacks as opportunities for learning and growth, thereby fostering a psychologically safe environment in which employees feel comfortable sharing both successes and failures (Alzyoud *et al.*, 2026; Monica and Srividya, 2025; Rego *et al.*, 2022). Human resource professionals should also communicate behavioral expectations during socialization initiatives, such as orientation and onboarding programs, by emphasizing the importance of open communication and KS behaviors while providing context-specific examples relevant to NPSOs (Boekhorst, 2015). In addition, training programs should equip employees and volunteers with the skills needed to communicate transparently, engage in respectful interactions and exchange diverse perspectives in an inclusive manner. These recommendations are particularly relevant for NPSOs, which rely heavily on volunteers whose continued engagement is driven primarily by intrinsic motivation and meaningful social experiences rather than monetary incentives (Ringuet-Riot *et al.*, 2014; Wicker, 2017). By fostering psychological safety and encouraging open dialogue, authentic leaders can strengthen employee and volunteer engagement and retention while enhancing their contributions to OL and overall organizational effectiveness.

Third, the findings underscore the importance of AL in shaping OC that facilitates KS and OL. At the organizational level, managers should align organizational policies and practices with the values of transparency and collaboration by embedding collective learning activities

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into strategic plans and promoting open communication across all organizational levels. These initiatives contribute to the development of an open, inclusive and transparent OC within sport organizations (Toumpeki and Gdonteli, 2026). At the individual level, line managers should consistently demonstrate the core principles of AL in their day-to-day interactions. By modeling AL behaviors and ensuring that their decisions reflect their values and ethical principles, leaders can encourage employees to emulate these behaviors, thereby fostering a culture of openness and trust. Complementing these leadership practices, human resource professionals should review HR policies, procedures and reward systems to ensure they reinforce integrity, transparency, consistency, openness and ethical decision-making. Recognizing and rewarding employees who consistently demonstrate these behaviors can further strengthen OC that values authenticity and KS (Borges, 2013). These inclusive and authentic managerial practices are particularly important in the sport sector, which continues to face challenges related to limited diversity and the prevalence of a hegemonic masculine culture (Burton, 2019; Spaaij *et al.*, 2018, 2020). At the same time, both for-profit and NPSOs operate in an environment characterized by rapid change and increasing demands for innovation, requiring managers to adopt more reflective, adaptive and collaborative management approaches (Cunningham, 2019). To address these sector-wide challenges, AL development initiatives should be integrated into national sport governance frameworks to promote cultural change, foster more inclusive workplaces and ultimately enhance the long-term sustainability of sport organizations in an increasingly competitive environment.

Finally, this research extends beyond individual organizations by offering broader implications for policymakers at the national level. As organizations across the public, nonprofit and private sectors face increasing complexity, resource constraints and rapid change, OL has become critical for fostering innovation, enhancing productivity and supporting long-term sustainability (Siriwardana *et al.*, 2026). The findings suggest that policymakers can therefore promote these outcomes by providing funding mechanisms, regulatory incentives and workforce development policies that embed AL principles into governance frameworks and employment relations strategies. Such policy initiatives can strengthen organizational capabilities while contributing to broader societal goals by fostering more collaborative, inclusive and accountable organizations (Adams *et al.*, 2020; Toumpeki and Gdonteli, 2026). Over time, promoting AL and OL across sectors can enhance social trust, civic engagement and cooperation, ultimately contributing to the development of a more collaborative, inclusive and resilient society.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that present important opportunities for future research. First, because this research focused exclusively on organizations within the sport sector, the findings may be context-specific and should therefore be interpreted with caution when generalizing to other contexts. To address this limitation, future research should extend the investigation to organizations in other sectors, particularly those facing different managerial, institutional and competitive challenges.

Second, we encourage future research to further examine the mechanisms through which AL influences OL by investigating alternative mediating constructs and boundary conditions. Although our findings support the sequential mediating roles of OC and KS, future studies should explore additional mediators, such as psychological meaningfulness, safety and availability, to further clarify how AL promotes OL. Furthermore, future research should investigate potential boundary conditions, such as ethical and innovative climates, to determine how these contextual factors shape the strength of the relationship between AL and OL.

Finally, despite implementing various procedural remedies, including randomized item ordering, to mitigate common method bias, its potential influence on the findings cannot be entirely ruled out. We therefore encourage future research to adopt more rigorous research

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design, such as temporal separation or experimental approaches, to provide stronger evidence regarding the causal relationships among the study constructs.

Conclusion

Grounded in SIP theory, this study advances understanding of how AL promotes OL. By identifying the sequential influence of OC and KS as a key mediating mechanism, the study provides a more integrated explanation of the processes through which AL fosters OL in NPSOs. These insights provide a foundation for future research to examine additional mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions that may further explain how AL influences OL in dynamic and complex contexts. Furthermore, the findings offer valuable practical insights for managers, particularly those in NPSOs, by demonstrating that AL represents an effective leadership style for cultivating an OC in which individuals feel encouraged to share their knowledge, thereby laying the foundations for OL and, ultimately, the long-term sustainability of sport organizations.

Acknowledgments

Ali Hadiannasab was affiliated with La Trobe University when this research was conducted and is currently affiliated with Kent Business School, University of Kent, United Kingdom. Generative artificial intelligence tools were used solely for proofreading and stylistic polishing. They were not used to generate research ideas, conduct the analysis, interpret the findings or develop the substantive content of the manuscript. The authors reviewed and approved all revisions and take full responsibility for the final content.

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