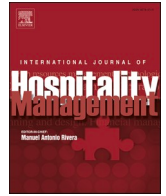




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The buck stops here: Understanding the nexus between responsible leadership and employee ambidexterity in hospitality industry

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the mediating effect of work meaningfulness on the relationship between responsible leadership and employee ambidexterity among restaurant employees. It also develops a moderated mediation model, assessing the boundary condition role of person-environment fit in the links between responsible leadership and its outcomes (i.e., work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity). Time-lagged data were collected from 383 employees at restaurants in India. At Time 1, data collection focused on measuring perceptions around responsible leadership and person-environment fit, while the Time 2 questionnaire, distributed a month later, aimed to capture insights related to employee ambidexterity and work meaningfulness. Matched data were analyzed using PLS-SEM. The study found that responsible leadership impacts employee ambidexterity directly and through work meaningfulness. The results also reveal that person-environmental fit moderates the relationship between a) work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity and b) responsible leadership and work meaningfulness. Further, the study found that the indirect effect of responsible leadership on employee ambidexterity via work meaningfulness was stronger when employees perceived a high-level person-environment fit. This study contributes to the responsible leadership literature by exploring how and when it affects employee-related aspects that have been unaddressed by previous examinations, making it novel. Based on our results, this study also provides key theoretical implications as well as actionable insights for the hospitality sector.

1. Introduction

Responsible leadership in the restaurant industry is not just a nice-to-have—it's a powerful driver of employee well-being and organizational success. A compelling example of responsible leadership in the hospitality industry comes from Chef Susan Spicer, founder of New Orleans' celebrated restaurants Mondo and Rosedale. As highlighted by McMillan (2019), Spicer's leadership goes far beyond culinary excellence—she champions ethical workplace practices, employee well-being, and inclusive growth. Once her restaurants reached financial stability, she

made a conscious choice to reinvest in her people: offering health insurance subsidies to staff working over 30 h a week, implementing paid vacation for all employees, and enabling cross-training to foster career development. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, she didn't wait for mandates; instead, she introduced anti-harassment training to create a workplace built on safety, respect, and dignity. These initiatives reflect a leadership philosophy rooted in care, fairness, and long-term value for all stakeholders. As Spicer herself put it, such steps “eliminate an element that prevents people from focusing on their work.” Her approach not only builds psychological safety and trust but also drives

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employee engagement, satisfaction, and meaningful performance—hallmarks of a thriving, people-first organization. This case powerfully illustrates that effective leadership styles can directly address these issues via promoting a culture of motivation, empowerment, and employee engagement, thereby enhancing productivity, reducing turnover, and promoting long-term retention within the organization (Wakabi, 2016). The significant role of leadership and its impact on boosting pro-social, pro-environmental, and pro-organizational behavior is narrated in previous research work. Previous research (e.g., Tian and Suo, 2021), has highlighted the significant role of leadership in enhancing pro-social, pro-organizational, and pro-environmental behaviors.

The importance of such leadership becomes even more pronounced when viewed against the backdrop of the hospitality industry's rapid growth and persistent workforce challenges. The hospitality sector is one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide, renowned for generating substantial profits in the global market (Burton and Dickinger, 2025). It has had rapid expansion in recent years, and industry projections indicate that by 2029, the sector might expand by 6.7%, accounting for 10% of the Indian economy (Mordor Intelligence, 2024). A total of 10.89 million foreign visitors entered the industry in 2019 at a growth rate of 3.2%. In 2020, the hospitality sector accounted for 8% of all employment or around 39 million jobs, and this number might rise to 52.3 million by 2028. The statistical data indicates that it has become a crucial part of India's services offering and is estimated to grow up to US \$ 500 billion (Mordor Intelligence, 2024). Despite its expansion, the hospitality industry is facing workforce-related challenges. The challenges prevalent in India's hospitality industry, such as unproductive behavior, high turnover rates, and difficulties in retaining dedicated staff (Gupta, 2019; Rishipal, 2019; Sanjeev and Birdie, 2019; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2019), underline the essential role played by the leadership.

Øgaard et al. (2008) contended that the prevalent traditional leadership ideologies in the business have failed to optimize the workforce capabilities. Arasli et al. (2020, p.2196) emphasized the need for "new industry-specific leadership models for the industry." Huertas-Valdivia et al. (2022) bibliographic study emphasized that research is still needed on new leadership styles in hospitality. Responsible leadership, extending beyond traditional leader-subordinate interactions, is a social-relational and ethical phenomenon that significantly influences organizational effectiveness, being perceived as more effective than other leadership styles (Maak and Pless 2006a; Maak and Pless 2006b; Voegtlin et al., 2020). Therefore, responsible leadership has received substantial interest and developed into a crucial and specifically researched leadership style (Zhao and Zhou, 2019). Rather than focusing solely on the leader-follower relationship—as seen in traditional leadership models like leader-member exchange or transformational leadership—responsible leadership emphasizes building meaningful connections with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders, addressing economic, social, and environmental dimensions of organizational activity (Miska, 2025).

Research by Yousaf et al. (2016) suggested that when employees perceive their leaders to be responsible, their likelihood of leaving is less. However, despite its crucial importance, this leadership style is not well-known in the hospitality industry (Özkan et al., 2023). Moreover, previous research has mostly concentrated on its pro-social outcomes (Ullah et al., 2021; Voegtlin et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Few studies have empirically investigated how responsible leadership (hereafter RL) affects employees' work-related behavior (Dong and Zhong, 2022; Haque et al., 2019), especially employee creative behavior (Zulfiqar et al., 2023) and innovative behavior (Dong and Zhong, 2021) and employees felt responsibility (Tuan, 2022). However, whether or not RL contributes to employee ambidexterity is unknown. Employee ambidexterity is the behavioral tendency of workers toward integrating manipulation and exploration-related actions within a specific time frame (Caniëls and Veld, 2019; Mom et al., 2007, 2007). Consequently,

this research tries to bridge the gap via focusing on how RL impacts the ambidexterity of the workers in restaurants.

Even though research has been conducted on how transformational leadership behavior promotes ambidexterity, there is no study that links employee ambidexterity with RL, making this investigation both timely and important (Jansen et al., 2008; Li et al., 2015; Nemanich and Vera, 2009). Some studies (Lämsä and Keränen, 2020; Mousa, 2017) suggest that RL integrates elements from other styles like servant, ethical, authentic, and transformational leadership. However, it stands out by emphasizing broader collaboration, inclusive dialogue, and active engagement with both internal and external stakeholders which makes it different from other styles of leadership. A generally accepted view argues that the characteristics of a firm's or a team's culture are taught by its leadership and eventually adopted by its followers (Nemanich and Vera, 2009). The development of employee ambidexterity, which is promoted through RL, is a crucial aspect of the hospitality industry (Wang et al., 2023). However, both theoretically and empirically researchers paid little attention to employee ambidexterity (Caniëls et al., 2017). Many studies indicated that there is a need for understanding employee ambidexterity and its antecedents (Caniëls and Veld, 2019; Junni et al., 2013; Prieto and Pilar Pérez Santana, 2012). It has been found that employee ambidexterity is a crucial determinant in advancing both organizational and individual performance across various industries (Joseph et al., 2023), such as the hospitality industry. Investigating ambidexterity in the hospitality industry is crucial, given the increasing competitive pressures driven by globalization and the demand for customization (Tang, 2014; Úbeda-García et al., 2022). Adopting an ambidextrous strategy can enhance service quality and help transform these pressures into strategic advantages (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021; Seraphin and Yallop, 2019). To remain competitive in an expanding global market, it is essential for hotels to strike a balance between exploration and exploitation—a concept known as ambidexterity—which remains underexplored in existing literature (Meira et al., 2019; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021; Úbeda-García et al., 2016). Employees, particularly in sales positions, are encouraged to exhibit ambidextrous behavior by simultaneously enhancing existing service delivery through careful attention to detail and experimenting with innovative approaches via adaptive selling. This combination allows them to deliver personalized customer experiences, foster stronger customer loyalty, and attract new clientele. For instance, frontline employees with extensive knowledge are well-equipped to manage and respond to the increasingly diverse and complex needs of customers. In contrast, back-office employees can leverage their expertise to create innovative marketing strategies and develop new service offerings (Lim and Ok, 2023). Frontline restaurant employees are expected to deliver consistent service (exploitation) while also adapting to changing customer preferences, technology (e.g., online ordering), and health/safety protocols (exploration). Understanding how RL fosters this dual capacity—employee ambidexterity—is critical to sustaining performance in such dynamic settings. RL, with its emphasis on ethical conduct, stakeholder engagement, and trust-building (Maak and Pless 2006a; Maak and Pless 2006b), aligns well with the interpersonal and moral challenges frontline employees face (e.g., managing diverse customers, ensuring fairness, responding to complaints). Investigating its influence offers insights into how leaders can create environments that support responsible and adaptable behaviors simultaneously.

Furthermore, while recent research such as (Haque, 2021) has explored the mechanisms connecting RL to its outcomes, the essential underlying processes between RL and employee ambidexterity remain underexplored. Although several studies, including Haque et al. (2019), have investigated the effects of RL on employee and organizational outcomes, limited studies have delved into the core mechanisms producing these results (Ansong et al., 2022; Zhao and Zhou, 2019). The current study aims to fill this gap by examining the underlying psychological mechanism between the relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity through work meaningfulness—a psychological

state, that promotes employee ambidexterity. It is widely acknowledged that there has been limited empirical research on work meaningfulness (Gui et al., 2022; Michaelson et al., 2014; Wang and Xu, 2019). Work meaningfulness is the value of a purpose or goal as assessed against an individual's personal standards (May et al., 2004; Spreitzer, 1995). According to recent empirical studies, employees who experience meaningfulness at their work show higher levels of engagement, motivation, and creative thinking in addition to maintaining the operational efficiency (Islam et al., 2021). Scholars of business ethics view meaningful work as a moral matter in the context of managing and leading others in work (Michaelson et al., 2014).

Besides, we have tried to ascertain the buffering mechanism of person-environment fit, which reflects the extent to which employee feels well-suited to their workplace (van den Bosch et al., 2019). Research has shown that person-environment fit is an influential factor that shapes the employees' experience of meaning in their work (Scroggins, 2008; Spreitzer, 1995). That is, an employee is more likely to feel that their work matters when workplace expectations and perks align with their needs, values, and skill set (Schnell et al., 2013; Tims et al., 2016). In the field of organizational, vocational, and related studies, the concept of person-environment fit has long been a central focus of theory and investigation (Chatman, 1989; Murray, 1938; Morse, 1975; Osipow, 1987; Pervin, 1978). The assumption of the person-environment (hereafter P-E) fit concept is that when a person's traits align with their circumstances, they will be more satisfied and perform their work more effectively. This, in turn, contributes to effective organization's performance (Ostroff and Rothausen, 1997). P-E fit captures the alignment between an individual's values, abilities, and needs and the characteristics of their work environment (Edwards, 2008; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). This alignment is crucial in shaping how employees perceive leadership, find meaning in their work, and engage in complex, extra-role behaviors like ambidexterity. While responsible leadership fosters an ethical and stakeholder-oriented climate, its influence is not universal. Employees are more likely to internalize the values of RL and translate them into meaningful engagement and ambidextrous behavior when they perceive a strong fit with their job or organization. Thus, P-E fit brings a contingency perspective to our model, helping explain the varying effects of RL across individuals.

In an attempt to address the aforementioned research gaps, this study aims to make three significant contributions. Firstly, previous studies have not been able to establish an association between RL and employee ambidexterity, particularly among restaurant employees working in India. Although some studies have shown that other leadership styles such as transformational leadership behaviour's promote ambidexterity (Jansen et al., 2008; Li et al., 2015; Nemanich and Vera, 2009), there has been no study on the relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity. Therefore, given the scarcity of studies, we aim to fill a noteworthy gap in the literature by exploring the mechanism that positively affects employee ambidexterity among restaurant employees. Secondly, we intend to explore how the sense of work meaningfulness functions as an underlying mechanism linking RL to employee ambidexterity. Few studies have examined the mediating role of work meaningfulness between RL and employee ambidexterity, highlighting the need for further investigation (Fürstenberg et al., 2021). Hence, this study advances our understanding of RL by providing a nuanced perspective of how RL can impact employee ambidexterity through work meaningfulness. Third, this research provides new insights into the moderating role of P-E fit in the relationship between work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity. From our knowledge and research, we found no empirical studies that have specifically examined the moderating influence of P-E fit within this association. To enhance understanding of these variables, we investigate the moderated effect of P-E fit on the association between work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity.

Finally, we provide a complementary perspective by incorporating theories like social learning theory and P-E fit theory. According to the

P-E fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), an employee's working behaviors and attitudes are influenced by how well their internal characteristics match with those of their organization. Additionally, as per Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, subordinates observe, emulate, and internalize their leaders' ideals to replicate leadership behaviors, which in turn guides their own behavior (Yang, 2019). Existing literature showcases the importance and demand for RL from both managerial and theoretical standpoints to accomplish employee ambidexterity within the hospitality industry.

2. Theoretical basis and research hypotheses

2.1. Responsible leadership and employee ambidexterity

RL refers to a "value-based and thorough ethical principles driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders" (Maak and Pless 2006a; Maak and Pless 2006b; Maak, 2007; Pless, 2007). Specifically, leaders play the expert role in meeting the organizational performance targets and facilitators attending to the requirements of staff members (Voegtlin et al., 2020). RL is anchored in spiritual ethics—grounded not merely in compliance or rational morality but in values such as compassion, justice, and humility. These principles are derived from inner consciousness, which inspires leaders to act with integrity and genuine concern for societal well-being (Maak and Pless 2006a; Maak and Pless 2006b; Pruzan and Miller, 2005). Maak and Pless (2006a); Maak and Pless (2006b) note that these leaders protect the opinions of individuals, forward an all-encompassing working environment, and authorize workers to offer both their skills and resources, which might boost employees' confidence and motivate them to embark on creative tasks (Niu et al., 2018). RL entails harmonizing economic performance with ethical, social, and environmental considerations to maintain organizational legitimacy and ensure long-term sustainability.

More than other styles of leadership, RL may have a greater impact on employees' motivation at work because they act as role models (Haque et al., 2019), and encourage innovative behavior among employees in the workplace (Dong and Zhong, 2021). Historically, RL in India has been rooted in the principles of accountability and attentiveness to public needs and aspirations (Dhanesh, 2015). Such leadership requires understanding the concerns of the people and making decisions that prioritize their well-being. It reflects the belief that leaders should go beyond governance to actively engage with and uplift their communities, thereby building trust and promoting collective responsibility. Planken et al. (2010) observe that Indian firms often focus on philanthropy, primarily engaging in initiatives aimed at community development. Indian leadership often reflects collectivist values (Brighi and Miska, 2025) (e.g., community orientation, family ties) rooted in traditions like "dharma" (duty) and "seva" (selfless service). Leaders are often expected to act as guardians rather than just business heads—balancing profit with people. RL in the Indian hospitality sector is increasingly important due to the industry's high reliance on people, service quality, and sustainability. In the Indian context, it is shaped by socio-cultural expectations, economic pressures, and global hospitality standards.

Here, we propose that RL may also encourage employee ambidexterity. Employee ambidexterity refers to the behavioral orientation of employees to integrate exploitation and exploration activities within a given time frame (Caniëls et al., 2017; Mom et al., 2007). Exploitative activities focus on refining and optimizing existing information, resources, and capabilities, while explorative activities are characterized by experimentation, innovation, and the pursuit of new opportunities, as noted by (Alam et al., 2023). In the hospitality sector, it may mean a front desk employee who simultaneously handles routine check-in procedures (exploitation) while proposing personalized service upgrades based on guest preferences (exploration). It can also mean a restaurant manager who optimizes existing workflows to improve efficiency (exploitation) while experimenting with new menu layouts or

digital ordering systems to enhance customer experience (exploration).

Previous research has identified various antecedents of individual-level ambidexterity, including psychological dispositions and personal characteristics (Spisak et al., 2014) as well as the organizational environment (Mom et al., 2009), among others. This link can also be understood through the framework of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) that posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing and imitating role models, especially those in positions of authority or influence. In organizational settings, leaders often serve as primary models for subordinates' observational learning. Social learning theory explains that individuals adjust their behaviors by watching, mimicking, and assimilating the actions of others (Bandura and Walters, 1977; Mayer et al., 2009). Responsible leaders, who act ethically, show concern for stakeholders, and balance short- and long-term goals, serve as role models. When employees observe such behaviors, they are more likely to adopt a similar approach, enabling them to explore new ideas while efficiently managing existing tasks—thus fostering ambidextrous behavior. Through such observational learning and imitation, employees are equipped to integrate explorative and exploitative tasks, culminating in ambidextrous behaviors. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H1. RL has a positive association with employee ambidexterity.

2.2. Mediating role of work meaningfulness

Work meaningfulness is defined as the value of a job's objective or purpose, evaluated in light of one's standards or goals (May et al., 2004; Renn and Vandenberg, 1995; Sashkin, 1982). Researchers have identified the psychological state of experienced meaningfulness as a significant psychological state or condition at work (May et al., 2004; Sashkin, 1982). Frankl (1992) asserted that people's main motivation is to find purpose in their work. It usually reflects an intrinsic interest in a task and mainly involves a fit between work role requirements and an individual's values and beliefs (Spreitzer, 1995). We posit that work meaningfulness will act as an underlying psychological mechanism between RL and employee ambidexterity. There has been a recent argument that organizational management has a moral obligation to make sure that people are engaged in meaningful work (Wang and Xu, 2019). Accordingly, we posit that RL is a main driver of meaningfulness at work. Recent studies indicated that employees who strongly identify with responsible leaders, experience higher levels of meaningful work, increasing their engagement in creativity (Rego et al., 2014; Yidong and Xinxin, 2013).

In the mediation model proposed by this study, we argue that RL leads to employee ambidexterity via work meaningfulness. We argue that RL fosters a work environment that is attentive to employees' needs, thereby enhancing their sense of work meaningfulness. When employees perceive their work as meaningful—aligned with their values and purpose—they are more likely to engage in both explorative and exploitative behaviors. Meaningfulness acts as a psychological mechanism that links values-based leadership to discretionary behaviors. When employees perceive their work as meaningful, they are more likely to go beyond formal duties and invest effort in problem-solving, service adaptation, and initiative—core components of ambidexterity. Given that meaningful work arises from supportive and ethically grounded leadership, RL can be viewed as a critical antecedent to work meaningfulness, which in turn promotes employee ambidexterity. RL, through ethical conduct, open communication, and empowerment, enhances employees' motivation and sense of value at work (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Maak and Pless, 2006c). By fostering trust and recognizing employee contributions, responsible leaders create meaningful work experiences (Han et al., 2020), which in turn promote ambidextrous behavior—enabling employees to both explore new ideas and exploit existing skills.

The social learning theory justifies this relation, supporting the

association among the variables. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), workers are inspired to act responsibly because they see their leaders as role models and replicate their behavior. This means that employees learn from responsible leaders and internalize their values. Therefore, in line with this theory, workers are more likely to feel meaning in their work if they observe responsible behavior, get vicarious reinforcement, and experience a rise in self-efficacy. In light of current empirical research, workers who believe their work has significance display greater levels of motivation, engagement, and creative thinking in addition to their capacity to maintain operational efficiency (Islam et al., 2021). Those who find meaning and purpose in their work are more likely to engage in ambidextrous activity, which includes both exploratory and exploitative behavior (Alam et al., 2023). This mediating pathway is grounded in social learning theory, which explains how employees internalize leadership behaviors. However, the degree to which this internalization leads to meaningfulness may depend on the level of environmental fit, as further developed in the subsequent moderation discussion. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Work meaningfulness mediates the relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity.

2.3. Moderating role of person-environment fit

P-E fit refers to the perceived alignment between an individual and their work environment (vavan den Bosch et al., 2019). It is commonly conceptualized through various forms, including Person-Job (P-J) fit and Person-Organization (P-O) fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). P-J fit reflects how well an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities align with job requirements (Carless, 2005), whereas P-O fit reflects the alignment of individual and organizational values, goals, and culture (Kristof, 1966). In this study, we operationalize P-E fit based on the framework by Van den Bosch and Taris (2018), which includes P-O complementary fit, P-O supplementary fit, and P-J supplementary fit. Supplementary fit exists when individuals perceive themselves as similar to others in the organization (van den Bosch et al., 2019), while complementary fit refers to how individual abilities fulfill environmental demands.

Previous research shows that P-E fit is positively associated with desirable outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior, work engagement, and innovation (Afsar and Badir, 2016; Farzaneh et al., 2014; Ugwu and Onyishi, 2020). Notably, prior studies suggest that P-E fit can function as a moderator by influencing the strength of relationships between leadership styles, work attitudes, and employee behaviors (Omar et al., 2022; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

More specifically, we clarify that P-E fit does not serve as an antecedent to meaningfulness, but rather strengthens the effect of meaningful work on ambidextrous behavior. Therefore, we argue that high levels of P-E fit are expected to amplify the positive effect of RL on work meaningfulness, and also enhance the translation of meaningfulness into ambidextrous behavior. Work meaningfulness reflects the degree to which employees perceive their tasks as purposeful and significant. While this perception can intrinsically motivate employees to engage in both exploratory (seeking novel ideas) and exploitative (refining existing tasks) behaviors—core components of employee ambidexterity—its impact is contingent upon how well employees feel aligned with their work environment. Theoretically, this moderation is grounded in P-E fit theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), which posits that individuals are more motivated and behaviorally engaged when their environment supports their personal goals and values. According to P-E fit theory, when employees experience high congruence between their values, abilities, and needs and the demands, culture, and rewards of the organization, they are more likely to perceive psychological safety, resource availability, and support. These factors amplify the motivational effects of meaningful work. In high P-E fit conditions, employees are better able to integrate meaningful work into their role

performance—thus enabling greater engagement in both explorative and exploitative tasks, the dual components of employee ambidexterity. In contrast, in low P-E fit contexts, even if employees find their work meaningful, misalignments (e.g., conflicting values, inadequate support, poor role clarity) can dampen the translation of that meaningfulness into action. The strain from misfit may deplete the psychological resources needed to perform ambidextrous behaviors, making it difficult for employees to balance innovation with efficiency. Further, this moderating role complements the social learning perspective by clarifying the conditions under which observed responsible leadership behaviors are most likely to be translated into psychological meaningfulness and ambidextrous action. Therefore, we argue:

H3. P-E fit moderates the relationship between work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity such that the positive association is stronger in the presence of a higher level of person-environment fit.

H4. P-E fit moderates the relationship between RL and work meaningfulness such that this relationship is stronger at a higher level of person-environment fit.

2.4. Moderated-mediation effects

The proposed moderated mediation model brings together social learning theory and P-E fit theory by suggesting that responsible leadership influences employee behavior through psychological processes, and that this process is contingent upon the degree of alignment employees perceive within their work environment. This study further suggests a moderated mediation effect, hypothesizing that P-E fit will moderate the indirect influence of RL on employee ambidexterity through the sense of work meaningfulness. That is when expectations and benefits align with an employee's needs, and values (Tims et al., 2016; Schnell et al., 2013). Employees, when they perceive a high level of P-J fit, experience meaning in work (Scroggins, 2008; Spreitzer, 1995), which further influences their ambidexterity positively (Omar et al., 2022; Yousaf et al., 2015). P-J fit and P-O fit lead to work meaningfulness which further leads to the development of employee engagement (James, 2023). Through job meaningfulness, RL can indirectly increase ambidexterity; however, P-E fit moderates this effect. Work becomes more meaningful when the conditions at work (RL) meet the demands of the employees (high P-E fit). This strong P-E fit increases meaningfulness and contributes to the rise in employee ambidexterity. Weaker P-E fit adversely affects the formation and development of work meaningfulness, which further harms employees' ambidexterity. In

other words, the positive effect of RL through work meaningfulness on employees' ambidexterity may be increased when they perceive higher level of P-E fit. As such, we propose the following hypothesis (see Fig. 1).

H5. The indirect relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity through work meaningfulness is moderated by P-E fit, such that this indirect relationship is stronger at higher levels of P-E fit.

3. Research methods

3.1. Sample

To test our hypotheses, we gathered data on RL, work meaningfulness, P-E fit, employee ambidexterity from restaurant workers working in various casual dining restaurants throughout India using purposive sampling. Although many of these establishments do not always have a formal or explicitly documented Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or RL strategies, they often demonstrate these values through embedded practices at the operational level. In many of the participating restaurants, RL was evident through day-to-day practices such as: Treating employees with dignity (such as fair wages, inclusive hiring, and staff training), ensuring customer health and safety through strict hygiene protocols and food quality standards, supporting community welfare by informal acts such as donating leftover food or participating in local causes, and demonstrating ethical accountability and stakeholder consciousness in the way managers balanced employee well-being, customer satisfaction, and business outcomes. While these practices may not be labeled as "CSR" or part of a formally documented leadership strategy, they reflect a values-driven approach to leadership that resonates with the principles of RL.

Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling method often employed when researchers aim to select specific individuals or cases that are of particular interest to the study (Campbell et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2010; Palinkas et al., 2015; Trost, 1986). Prior to undertaking data collection, an exploratory survey was administered to a small subset of restaurant employees. The aim was to understand the prevalence of RL practices. The feedback stressed the importance of our research theme, further solidifying our decision to proceed.

With the necessary permissions obtained from restaurant proprietors, we began our formal data collection process. The study leveraged a time-lagged data collection approach, encompassing two distinct time points (Time 1 and Time 2). At Time 1, data collection focused on measuring perceptions around RL and P-E fit, while the Time 2 questionnaire, distributed a month later, aimed to capture insights related to

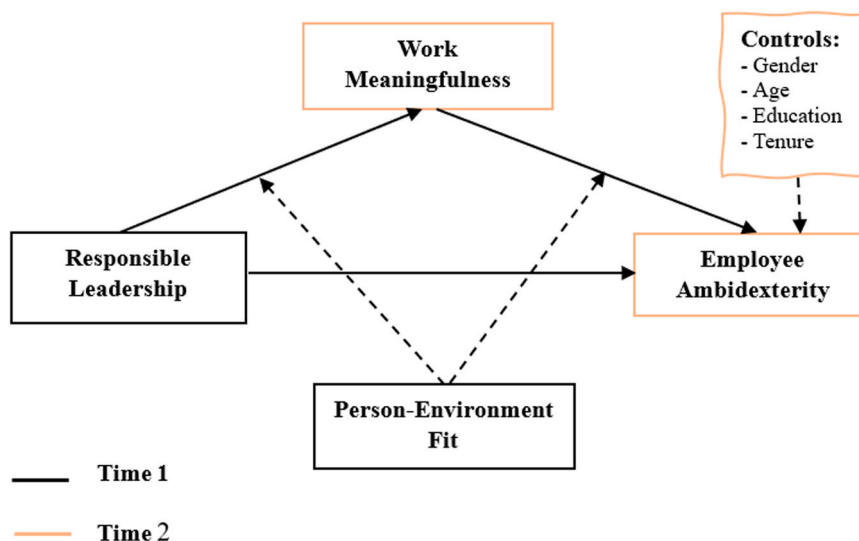


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

employee ambidexterity and work meaningfulness. To maintain consistency between the two sets of responses (from Time 1 and Time 2), we used a participant-generated identification system. This approach enabled us to align the responses from the same individual across both time frames, ensuring data integrity and relevance. Given the personal nature of some queries, potential respondents expressed concerns regarding the confidentiality of their responses. We addressed these concerns by assuring participants of their anonymity and confidentiality, a practice highlighted by numerous scholars as essential in ensuring candid and accurate responses in academic research (Ali, 2023; Bell et al., 2022; Dube et al., 2014; Morse, 1998; Wiles et al., 2008). In addition to time lagged data collection and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents, we used randomization in the order of items and scales to reduce pattern-based responses to reduce the occurrence of common method bias. We also included a included an attention-check question to improve data quality namely: A cat is a bird (True/False). A total of 473 questionnaire was distributed at T1. At Time 1 (T1), a total of 428 questionnaires were returned. After screening for completeness and data quality, 407 responses were retained. These respondents were re-contacted at Time 2 (T2), and 388 participants completed the second survey. Following data-quality checks at T2 and matching responses across both waves, 383 responses were identified as

Table 1
Mean, SD, items' loadings, reliability and validity measures.

Construct/ Items	Mean	SD	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE	VIF
Responsible Leadership (RL)				0.93	0.95	0.79	2.19
RL_1	3.43	.586	(0.904)				
RL_2	3.24	.624	(0.900)				
RL_3	3.02	.581	(0.885)				
RL_4	2.83	.632	(0.871)				
RL_5	2.60	.599	(0.888)				
Employee Ambidexterity (EA)				0.96	0.97	0.78	2.85
EA_1	3.46	.602	(0.751)				
EA_2	3.40	.616	(0.760)				
EA_3	3.25	.708	(0.919)				
EA_4	3.10	.679	(0.915)				
EA_5	3.03	.650	(0.905)				
EA_6	2.92	.615	(0.898)				
EA_7	2.81	.609	(0.907)				
EA_8	2.68	.612	(0.923)				
EA_9	2.60	.616	(0.922)				
EA_10	2.53	.611	(0.912)				
Work Meaningfulness (WM)				0.94	0.95	0.76	2.37
WM_1	3.46	.598	(0.882)				
WM_2	3.25	.593	(0.867)				
WM_3	3.10	.590	(0.860)				
WM_4	2.92	.600	(0.874)				
WM_5	2.75	.612	(0.862)				
WM_6	2.58	.571	(0.888)				
Person-environment fit (PEF)				0.97	0.97	0.80	2.30
PEF_1	3.44	.574	(0.898)				
PEF_2	3.36	.600	(0.904)				
PEF_3	3.28	.605	(0.903)				
PEF_4	3.18	.589	(0.896)				
PEF_5	3.09	.583	(0.889)				
PEF_6	3.02	.581	(0.893)				
PEF_7	2.91	.589	(0.890)				
PEF_8	2.82	.591	(0.896)				
PEF_9	2.72	.574	(0.891)				
PEF_10	2.64	.596	(0.882)				
PEF_11	2.54	.597	(0.870)				

Notes: N = 383. RL= Responsible leadership; WM= Work meaningfulness; EA= Employee ambidexterity; PEF= Person-environment fit.
Source: Authors own work

complete and suitable for the final analysis (473 invited at T1 → 428 returned at T1 → 407 usable at T1 → 407 invited at T2 → 388 returned at T2 → 383 usable at T2). The matched sample consisted of 213 males (55.61 %) and 170 females (44.39 %). Regarding age, 225 participants (58.75 %) were between 20 and 30 years old, followed by 71 participants (18.53 %) aged 31–40 years. A total of 39 participants (10.18 %) were between 41 and 50 years old, and 48 participants (12.53 %) were aged 51 years and above. It is evident that majority of our interviewees belong to Generation Z and have completed senior secondary education. In the Indian casual dining sector, frontline roles such as waitstaff, kitchen assistants, and service crew are typically occupied by younger employees, often with a senior secondary education and belonging to Generation Z. In contrast, millennials have generally moved into supervisory or managerial positions, which fall outside the scope of our frontline-focused study.

In terms of educational qualifications, a significant portion (288 or 75.19 %) completed senior secondary education. A total of 80 respondents (20.89 %) held a graduation degree, and a minority of 15 (3.92 %) had postgraduate qualifications. Analyzing tenure, 138 participants (36.03 %) had less than 5 years of experience in the hospitality sector, 231 (60.31 %) had between 5 and 10 years of experience, and a mere 14 (3.65 %) reported having between 11 and 15 years of tenure. Gender, age, education and tenure were used as control variables. However, their effects were found to be insignificant.

3.2. Measures

Responsible leadership: RL was measured using a five-item scale proposed by Voegtlin (2012), focusing on the relationship perspective of leadership. Participants expressed their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “Strongly Disagree” and 5 denoting “Strongly Agree”. A representative item is: “My direct supervisor demonstrates awareness of the relevant stakeholder claims.” The scale demonstrated a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.896.

Employee ambidexterity: We gauged employee ambidexterity using a ten-item scale from the study by Mom et al. (2007) Responses were captured on a 5-point Likert scale. A sample statement from this scale is: “Searching for new possibilities with respect to products/services, processes, or markets.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.959.

Work meaningfulness: Work meaningfulness was assessed with a six-item scale created by (May et al., 2004). Participants rated their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. A sample statement from this scale is, “The work I do on this job is very important to me.” This measure demonstrated Cronbach’s alpha reliability of 0.921.

Person-environment fit: P-E fit of the participants was assessed using an eleven-item scale based on the work of Van den Bosch and Taris (2018). Participants marked their responses on a 5-point Likert scale. A sample item from this tool is: “I fit my job well.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale stood at 0.965.

4. Data analysis

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) has been widely applied across various fields within management science, such as strategy, marketing, and psychology (Hair et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2018). There are two main approaches to SEM: Covariance-based (CB) SEM and Partial Least Squares (PLS) SEM. PLS-SEM is generally preferred over CB-SEM for exploratory research that focuses on understanding the relationships between independent and dependent variables, whereas CB-SEM is often used in confirmatory studies (Dash and Paul, 2021; Hair et al., 2020). Given the exploratory nature of this study, PLS-SEM was selected as the most appropriate method for testing the research model. The analysis was conducted using WarpPLS (8.0) software, which improves the efficiency of parameter estimation (Hair Jr et al., 2020). PLS analysis of a conceptual model involves two main steps: first, evaluating the measurement model and, second, assessing the structural model.

Table 2
Fornell-Larcker criteria.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. RL	(0.890)							
2. WM	0.684***	(0.884)						
3. EA	0.614***	0.694***	(0.872)					
4. PEF	0.580***	0.695***	0.661***	(0.892)				
5. Gender	0.006	-0.039	-0.036	0.037	-			
6. Age	0.203***	0.195***	0.194***	0.103*	-0.019	-		
7. Education	0.046	0.020	0.065	0.032	0.002	-0.121	-	
8. Tenure	-0.041	0.006	-0.070	-0.023	0.070	0.006	-0.006	-

Notes:

RL= Responsible leadership; WM= Work meaningfulness; EA= Employee ambidexterity; PEF= Person-environment fit.

** $p < 0.01$,

* $p < 0.05$,

*** $p < 0.001$

4.1. Measurement model

To assess the quality of the study instruments, we utilized two main criteria: construct reliability and both convergent and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2020). The constructs in this study were quantified reflectively as first-order constructs. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR). According to the data presented in Table 2, both CA and CR values exceeded the established benchmarks of 0.70, affirming strong reliability for the study constructs. Additionally, to assess convergent validity, factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated, meeting the thresholds of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively, as proposed by (Kock et al., 2024). This is evidenced in Table 1, where both factor loadings and AVE values surpassed the set thresholds, thereby verifying the constructs' convergent reliability. The Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) was applied to evaluate discriminant validity, and as shown in Table 2, each construct's square root of average variance extracted was greater than its correlations with other constructs, confirming adequate discriminant validity. Discriminant validity was further assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT), which is considered a more stringent and robust criterion than cross-loadings and Fornell–Larcker (Kock et al., 2024). All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (see Table 3), indicating satisfactory discriminant validity.

Additionally, to address potential multicollinearity and method biases, variance inflation factor (VIF) values and Harman's single-factor test were employed, following recommendations from (Kock and Lynn, 2012). The VIF values, as indicated in Table 1, remained below 3, suggesting minimal collinearity concerns (Hair et al., 2012). Moreover, a subsequent post-hoc application of Harman's single-factor test revealed that a single factor explained only 0.31 of the total variances, significantly below the 50 % threshold, indicating no prevalent method bias in the collected data.

The model-fit and quality indices are shown in Table 4. Following (Kock, 2022), the average block VIF (AVIF = 1.875) was well below recommended thresholds, and both the average path coefficient (APC) and average R-squared (ARS) were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was 0.052, which falls within the commonly accepted range for adequate model fit.

Table 3
Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratios of correlations.

	RL	EA	WM	PEF
RL	-			
EA	0.810	-		
WM	0.751	0.793	-	
PEF	0.735	0.764	0.784	-

Notes: All HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 4
Model fit indices.

Model fit indices	Results	Thresholds	References
Average path coefficient (APC)	0.509 ($p < 0.001$)	$p < 0.001$	(Kock and Lynn, 2012; Gupta et al., 2020)
Average R-squared (ARS)	0.534 ($p < 0.001$)	$p < 0.001$	
Average variance inflation factor (AVIF)	1.875	acceptable if $< = 5$, ideally $< = 3.3$	
SRMR	0.052	≤ 0.10	(Kock and Lynn, 2012)
Tenenhaus GoF	0.690	> 0.36	(Tenenhaus et al., 2005)

Following Tenenhaus et al. (2005), the Tenenhaus GoF value (0.690) exceeds the benchmark of 0.36, denoting a good overall model fit. Taken together, these indicators confirm that the outer model is valid and acceptable.

4.2. Structural model

Following the completion of the initial phase of assessing the measurement model, we proceed to the inner model, which presents the p-values and path coefficients (β) of the hypothesized associations. Specifically, the results depicted in Table 5 demonstrate a significant and positive relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity ($\beta = 0.749$; $p < 0.001$), explaining 58 % of the variances (R^2). This result lends support to H1. Additionally, the indirect effects of RL on employee ambidexterity through work meaningfulness were examined. The results also reveal that the indirect relationship of RL with employee ambidexterity through work meaningfulness was significant ($\beta = 0.294$; $p = 0.001$), and the direct relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity, after including the mediator, decreased but still significant ($\beta = 0.454$; $p < 0.001$). This suggests a partial mediating role of work meaningfulness in the linkage between RL and employee ambidexterity, offering support to H2. In addition, the Q-squared values, which indicate cross-validated redundancy, for the dependent

Table 5
Direct and mediation effects.

H	Direct Paths	Beta	p-value	SE	R ²	Q ²	Decision
H1	RL → EA	0.729	< 0.001	0.046	0.552	0.550	Supported
H2	RL → WM → EA	0.269	< 0.001	0.035	0.638	0.639	Supported

Notes: N = 383. Control variables (gender, age, education, and tenure) were included in the analysis.

RL= Responsible leadership; WM= Work meaningfulness; EA= Employee ambidexterity; PEF= Person-environment fit.

Source: Authors own work

components are all greater than zero, as shown in Table 5, which ascertains the predictive efficacy of the research model.

4.3. Moderating and moderated mediation effects

In order to test hypotheses H3 and H4, we examined the moderating effect of person-environment fit on the relationship between a) work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity, and b) RL and work meaningfulness. As shown in Table 6, the findings reveal that person-environment fit has a positive moderating influence on the relationship between work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity ($\beta = 0.207, p = 0.014, t = 2.220, [0.024, 0.390]$) but a higher moderating effect on the relationship between RL and work meaningfulness ($\beta = 0.240, p = 0.001, t = 3.107, [0.089, 0.392]$). These findings indicate that both the effect of work meaningfulness on employee ambidexterity and the effect of RL on work meaningfulness are contingent on person-environment fit, therefore confirming H3 and H4, respectively. We explore a more in-depth interpretation of the moderating effects by considering the simple slopes at different levels of the moderator (± 1 SD). As depicted by slopes in Figs. 2 and 3, the positive effect of WM on EA is stronger at high PEF ($\beta = 0.589, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.423, 0.755]$) and weaker at low PEF ($\beta = 0.175, p = 0.015, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.036, 0.314]$). Similarly, the effect of RL on WM is more pronounced when PEF is high ($\beta = 0.622, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.474, 0.770]$) and weaker when PEF is low ($\beta = 0.158, p = 0.015, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.030, 0.286]$).

With regard to the moderated mediation effect (H5), we tested the moderating effect of PEF on the indirect relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity through work meaningfulness (first-stage moderated mediation). According to the results presented in Table 6, the moderated-mediation index (RL \times PEF \rightarrow WM \rightarrow EA) was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.200, p = 0.017, t = 2.146, [0.017, 0.383]$), supporting H5. A simple slopes analysis was conducted to evaluate the conditional indirect effects at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of PEF. The results indicate that the indirect effect of RL on EA through WM is stronger under high PEF ($\beta = 0.328, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.212, 0.444]$) and weaker under low PEF ($\beta = 0.156, p = 0.018, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.028, 0.284]$), consistent with hypothesis H5. This implies that the indirect relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity via work meaningfulness becomes more pronounced under a high level of person-environment fit compared to a lower level. A summary of the hypotheses testing results is presented in Table 7.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The current study draws insights from social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), and person-environment fit theory (Kristof-Brown

et al., 2005), as a theoretical extension to explain the association between RL and employee ambidexterity. This paper contributes to the absolute dearth of studies in the RL area providing a lucid understanding of RL influencing employee ambidexterity among restaurant employees. Our study revealed that RL positively relates to employee ambidexterity, therefore, providing new insight into the literature by showing that RL enhances the employee ambidexterity among restaurant employees. Consequently, H1 was confirmed. Previous studies have also contended that RL leads to various positive behavioral outcomes such as knowledge-sharing behavior (Haider et al., 2022), work engagement (Dong and Zhong, 2022), employees' affective commitment, and their intention to quit (Haque et al., 2019), among many others. Past studies have also found that RL has a positive relationship with innovative behavior (Dong and Zhong, 2021).

In addition, our study also tested the mediating effects of work meaningfulness in the RL- employee ambidexterity relationship. Past studies have not addressed the association between RL and employee ambidexterity with an underlying mechanism of work meaningfulness. Only a handful of previous studies have used work meaningfulness as a mediator (Almazrouei et al., 2023; Pradhan and Jena, 2019; Yasin Ghadi et al., 2013). Hence, this study provides new insight. Consistent with the notion of social learning theory, which suggests that people observe the behavior of significant others and try to replicate that, we argue that RL leads to work meaningfulness and work meaningfulness further attenuates employee ambidexterity. Therefore, H2 was validated.

Further, the study also tested the moderating role of person-environment fit in the RL and individual employee ambidexterity relationship. It was found that person-environment fit moderated the relationship between work meaningfulness and employee ambidexterity. Therefore, H3 was confirmed. It was also found that person-environment fit moderated the association between RL and work meaningfulness. Thus, H4 was also supported. Moreover, the study explored the moderated mediation mechanism of person-environment fit such that the indirect effect of RL on employee ambidexterity (via work meaningfulness) was stronger when a person-environment fit was strong rather than weak. The person-environment fit theory also explains this. Based on the ideas of this theory, a high-person environment fit will result in higher employee ambidexterity because employees will enhance their work meaningfulness if they perceive a high-person environment fit. Interestingly, as expected, the results were found to be significant, and therefore H5 was supported.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This research adds considerable value to the present body of knowledge available and has important conceptual implications for the

Table 6
Moderation & moderated mediation results.

Path	Beta	SE	f ²	T	P	LLCI	ULCI
The moderating effect of PEF on WM & EA (H3)							
PEF \rightarrow EA	0.271	0.092	0.143	2.961	0.002	0.092	0.451
WM \rightarrow EA	0.382	0.089	0.235	4.300	<0.001	0.208	0.557
WM \times PEF	0.207	0.093	0.108	2.220	0.014	0.024	0.390
<i>Model summary: R² = 0.561, Adj. R² = 0.529, Q² = 0.545</i>							
The moderating effect of PEF on RL & WM (H4)							
PEF \rightarrow WM	0.326	0.076	0.182	4.294	<0.001	0.177	0.475
RL \rightarrow WM	0.216	0.078	0.117	2.769	0.003	0.063	0.368
RL \times PEF	0.240	0.077	0.154	3.107	0.001	0.089	0.392
<i>Model summary: R² = 0.146, Adj. R² = 0.128, Q² = 0.457</i>							
The moderating effect of PEF on the indirect link of RL & EA via WM (H5)							
PEF \rightarrow EA	0.265	0.092	0.140	2.891	0.002	0.085	0.445
RL \rightarrow EA	0.400	0.089	0.252	4.508	<0.001	0.226	0.573
RL \times PEF on RL \rightarrow WM \rightarrow EA	0.200	0.093	0.105	2.146	0.017	0.017	0.383
<i>Model summary: R² = 0.562, Adj. R² = 0.525, Q² = 0.546</i>							

Notes: RL= Responsible leadership; WM= Work meaningfulness; EA= Employee ambidexterity; PEF= Person-environment fit.
Source: Authors own work

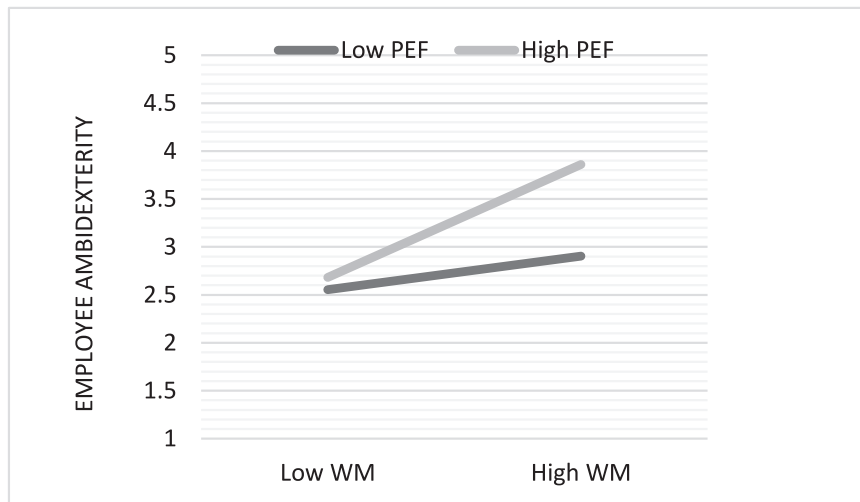


Fig. 2. The moderating effect of PEF on the relationship between WM and EA.

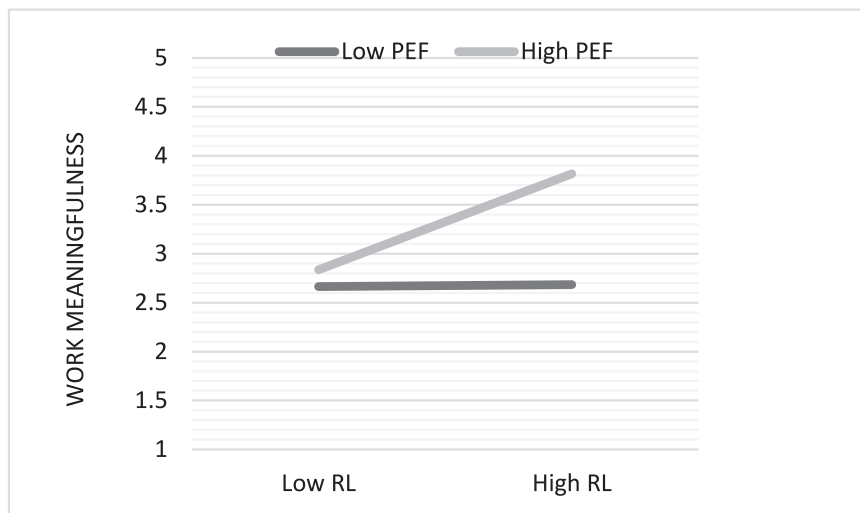


Fig. 3. The moderating effect of PEF on the relationship between RL and WM.

Table 7
Summary of the structural equation results.

Effect Type	Path	β	SE	t	p	95 % CI	R ²	Q ²	f ²	Notes
Direct	RL → EA	0.729	0.046	15.804	<0.001	[0.639, 0.819]	0.552	0.550	0.744	H1 supported
Mediation	RL → WM → EA	0.269	0.035	7.686	<0.001	[0.200, 0.338]	0.638	0.639	0.370	Partial mediation; H2 supported
Moderation	WM × PEF → EA	0.207	0.093	2.220	0.014	[0.024, 0.390]	0.561	0.545	0.108	H3 supported
	RL × PEF → WM	0.240	0.077	3.107	0.001	[0.089, 0.392]	0.146	0.457	0.154	H4 supported
Moderated Mediation	RL × PEF → WM → EA	0.200	0.093	2.146	0.017	[0.017, 0.383]	0.562	0.546	0.105	H5 supported

literature on employee ambidexterity and RL. First, it was found that RL was positively related to employee ambidexterity. This association has remained unaddressed by the previous studies (Castro-González et al., 2019; Dong and Zhong, 2022). Previous studies have examined the association between RL, ethical climate and sustainable performance (Khanam et al., 2025), work engagement, knowledge sharing (Ali et al., 2025) etc. Moreover, employee ambidexterity is still an emerging concept in hospitality and there is limited understanding in hospitality about the organizational factors enhance it. Our findings add novelty by stating the significance of responsible leadership: it not only encourages better service behavior but also nurtures the employee in terms of significance and social worth in service delivery. Furthermore, this study from a collectivist nation like India adds to the scant body of research on

RL in Asian cultural contexts. Second, considering the extreme lack of research on the potential of work meaningfulness, this study contributes to the current literature by investigating the underlying mediational mechanism of work meaningfulness. Third, this work highlights the boundary conditions that sustain the interaction between the RL and employee ambidexterity by investigating the buffering effects of person-environment fit. According to the results, there is a stronger association between employee ambidexterity and RL when there is a higher level of person-environment fit. A higher person-environment fit level moderates this association. The presence of a higher level of person-environment fit strengthened the relationship between the two, thereby adding to the literature. As a result, this study connected different fields of independent research, opening novel opportunities for

each field's progress. Fourth, by using social learning theory to explain why RL promotes meaningful work, this study makes a crucial theoretical contribution. As a result, employee ambidexterity goes a step further to identify the suggested relations in the context of social learning theory. In line with social learning theory, ambidexterity among employees is a result of meaningful work, which is facilitated by RL because employees emulate the responsible leader. Thus, by connecting the social learning theory and person-environment fit theory to a fresh model, this study aims to further theory building. Previously other theories, such as social exchange theory (Haider et al., 2022) and social identity theory (Dong and Zhong, 2021) have linked RL with a variety of outcomes. Using social learning theory and person-environment theory, this study expands on the literature on RL. Lastly, although the study was conducted in Indian casual dining restaurants, the underlying mechanism are likely to extend to hospitality industry worldwide. Since, hospitality environments such as resorts, hotels, quick service restaurant, fine dining restaurants share similar customer demands and pressures.

Employees in these establishments encounter dynamic customer expectations, high customization requirement, and pressure to maintain quality in the unpredictable situations. In these settings, the findings of the study would play a critical role as the psychological process are equally relevant across global service-oriented industries.

Therefore, the role of RL remains paramount across service industry. Moreover, the model can extend to other regions (Asia, US, UK etc.) where hospitality employees operate under comparable job structures while allowing for cross cultural contingencies. Organizations differ in terms of culture, structure and environment, but employee's psychological needs remain consistent across the societies. The core mechanisms of the study are based on universal theories and concepts and are same everywhere, which suggests that the result can be extend beyond the continent as well as other service businesses.

Thus, while contextual nuances must be considered, the study's core mechanisms have a strong potential for international transferability across various hospitality and service sectors.

5.2. Managerial implications

Apart from theoretical implications, this study presents various managerial implications as well. First, this study found that RL can lead to an increase in employee ambidexterity. To assist managers in elevating the value of RL practices, businesses ought to prioritize specialized development and training programs (Yasin, 2021). Organizations can arrange training on ethics (Quinn, 2018), sustainability (Law et al., 2017), and social responsibility. It is important for organizations to clearly define and communicate their expectations for RL within the organization. They should encourage leaders to lead by example. Besides, a firm's ability to identify, assimilate, and exploit external knowledge—its absorptive capacity (a combination of the ability and motivation to acquire, assimilate, and apply knowledge)—is critical for innovation (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Minbaeva et al., 2002). RL, by fostering openness, stakeholder engagement, and ethical dialogue, may enhance this absorptive capacity by promoting knowledge sharing and cross-boundary learning. Such a climate enables employees to better recognize and integrate valuable external information, thus supporting ambidextrous behavior. Integrating manager training into a digital Learning Management System (LMS) offers a practical mechanism for sustaining these leadership development efforts by providing consistent, accessible, and up-to-date training that equips managers to support both exploration and exploitation among staff (Moen, 2024). Through consistent training delivery, managers develop the skills to encourage innovation (e.g., trying new service approaches or menu items) while also reinforcing operational efficiency and best practices. Well-trained managers are therefore better positioned to foster a learning-oriented climate, deliver timely feedback, and cultivate psychologically safe environments in which employees can experiment without jeopardising

performance, strengthening the dual capacities for exploration and exploitation that define ambidexterity.

Integrating insights from strategy-as-practice research (Golsorkhi et al., 2010), it becomes evident that middle managers are pivotal actors in translating responsible leadership into operational outcomes, bridging the gap between top management intentions and frontline ambidextrous behaviors. Managers, especially in hospitality, should enable middle managers to act as strategists who interpret and operationalize responsible leadership at the frontline, fostering employee ambidexterity. Complementing this perspective, the integrative framework proposed by Castro et al. (2024) offers a valuable lens for evaluating business models beyond economic performance, incorporating ethical, social, and environmental dimensions into organisational value creation. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that hospitality leaders should adopt a holistic responsible-leadership approach that empowers middle managers as strategy translators and evaluates leadership initiatives against wider stakeholder and societal outcomes, rather than focusing solely on operational metrics.

From an implementation standpoint, situational leadership training should be introduced to enable managers to adjust leadership behaviours to staff readiness and service contexts (for example, peak service periods versus quieter operating times). Crisis management and resilience-building interventions should additionally prepare managers to uphold responsible leadership principles under pressure, including staff shortages or supply-chain disruptions. Job rotation and cross-training can be provided, as these interventions encourage exploration through skill diversification while reinforcing core service competencies associated with exploitation. Responsible leadership Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be embedded within managerial appraisal systems by evaluating ethical decision-making, team well-being, and stakeholder engagement alongside traditional financial or productivity outcomes, thereby institutionalising RL behaviours within performance management.

It is also suggested that senior leaders should embody RL principles in their actions and decisions, as visibly responsible behaviour establishes a strong ethical tone across hospitality organisations. Furthermore, it is important to clearly articulate organisational mission and values so that employees can connect their daily work to a broader social and service purpose, thereby strengthening perceptions of work meaningfulness. Where feasible, systematic job-matching approaches should be adopted to align employees' roles with their personal values, aspirations, and skills, reinforcing perceptions of person-environment fit. Furthermore, organisations should involve employees in decision-making processes, particularly concerning work design and service improvement, as participatory practices enhance psychological ownership and engagement. Leaders can also be guided through executive coaching interventions supported by 360-degree feedback systems to heighten awareness of their leadership impact and encourage continuous behavioural refinement (Osborne, 2016). Finally, employee voice platforms such as structured consultation forums, digital surveys, and suggestion systems should be formalised to capture frontline insights, support exploratory learning, and provide managers with actionable intelligence on staff needs and service innovation opportunities, thereby reinforcing the application of responsible leadership to everyday service management.

5.3. Research limitations and future research prospects

There are certain limitations to the study, which provide an opportunity for future studies. First, the sample was limited to hospitality employees in India, and the unique characteristics of the hospitality profession and the influence of Indian national culture may have impacted the results. To enhance the generalizability of our findings, future research should validate whether these findings apply to different contexts, including Western and various professional settings. Further, the sample was limited to employees of restaurants, which may limit the

extrapolation to other situations. As a result, future studies can apply the results of this study to different settings. Second, due to practical and logistical constraints, we relied on purposive sampling. While this approach allowed for targeted data collection, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, such as limited generalizability of findings and potential researcher bias in participant selection. Additionally, although we implemented procedural remedies to reduce common method bias (e.g., time-lagged design and ensuring anonymity), a marker variable was not feasible as no unrelated construct was measured. We acknowledge this limitation, but the procedural safeguards and Harman's single-factor test provide reasonable protection against common method bias.

Third, our study found a significant moderating effect of person-environment fit on the relationship between RL and employee ambidexterity. However, some studies have contended that high person-organization fit can be detrimental as well since it makes change difficult such as improvement in innovative behavior and work engagement. In a team or work unit, having a very high person-organization fit in terms of similarities might be harmful (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). Future studies can explore this variable more about other variables. Future research should explore the potential moderating roles of other factors, like distributive justice or procedural justice, to determine whether they influence this association. Forth, despite our efforts to minimize common method bias through a time-lagged data collection approach, it is impossible to eliminate its effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Hence, future studies should consider employing longitudinal or experimental research designs to provide a more robust assessment of the relationships under investigation. Further studies on organizational perspective of ambidexterity may also be conducted. Finally, our study primarily focused on frontline employee perceptions. However, middle managers play a critical role in translating organizational strategy into actionable behaviors for frontline employees—and also in communicating upward the practical realities and innovative inputs from the frontline. This bidirectional role is essential for enabling both exploitation and exploration, especially in dynamic service environments like casual dining. Future studies can examine the role of middle management in fostering ambidexterity.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Juman Iqbal: Writing – original draft, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Gowri Venkata Rajani:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation. **Muhammad Abdul Aziz:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ranjit Singh:** Supervision, Project administration. **Hafiz Mudassar Rehman:** Methodology. **Badawy S.Y. Sayed:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Ethical clearance

Formal ethical clearance was not required for this study, as it involved only anonymous, non-identifiable responses and posed no potential risk to participants.

Declaration of Competing Interest

We affirm that the manuscript is original, has not been published elsewhere, and is not under consideration by any other journal. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Appendix

1. Responsible Leadership (5 items) – Voegtlin (2012)

My direct supervisor...

1. demonstrates awareness of the relevant stakeholder claims
2. considers the consequences of decisions for the affected stakeholders
3. involves the affected stakeholders in the decision-making process
4. weighs different stakeholder claims before making a decision
5. tries to achieve a consensus among the affected stakeholders

2. Employee Ambidexterity (10 items) – Mom et al. (2007), (2007)

1. Searching for new possibilities with respect to products/services, processes or markets.
2. Evaluating diverse options with respect to products/services, processes or markets.
3. Focusing on strong renewal of products/services or processes.
4. Activities requiring quite some adaptability of you.
5. Activities requiring you to learn new skills or knowledge.
6. Activities of which a lot of experience has been accumulated by yourself.
7. Activities which serve existing (internal) customers with existing services/products.
8. Activities of which it is clear to you how to conduct them.
9. Activities which clearly fit into existing company policy.
10. Activities which you can properly conduct by using your present knowledge.

3. Work Meaningfulness (6 items) – May et al. (2004)

1. The work I do on this job is very important to me.
2. My job activities are personally meaningful to me.
3. The work I do on this job is worthwhile.
4. My job activities are significant to me.
5. The work I do on this job is meaningful to me.
6. I feel that the work I do on my job is valuable.

4. Person-environment (P-E) fit – Van den Bosch and Taris (2018).

1. I fit my job well.
2. This job fits all my wishes and desires.
3. I am still not tired of the job I am doing.
4. There is a good match between what my job offers me and what I am looking for in a job.
5. My organization offers me exactly what I am looking for.
6. I cannot imagine an organization that would fit me better.
7. My organization meets all my wishes and desires.
8. This organization's culture fits me well.
9. I am important for my organization since my personal values differ from theirs.
10. I am valuable for my organization, exactly because I valuable other things.
11. Due to my divergent ideas, I am important for my organisation.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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