



## Work-Life Balance as a Mediator between Ambidextrous Leadership and Well-Being among New-Generation Manufacturing Employees in Sichuan

Guo Zhengyi, PhD

### Abstract

This study examined the relationship between ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and employee well-being among new-generation employees in manufacturing companies in Sichuan, China. As younger employees increasingly value autonomy, flexibility, and meaningful work, manufacturing firms face pressure to adopt leadership approaches that support both organizational efficiency and employee-centered outcomes. Anchored on Conservation of Resources Theory, the study investigated whether work-life balance mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 255 employees born after 1990 and working in Sichuan manufacturing firms. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire measuring ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and well-being. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability and validity testing, Pearson correlation, hierarchical regression, and bootstrap mediation analysis. Results showed that ambidextrous leadership had a significant positive effect on employee well-being and work-life balance. Work-life balance was also positively associated with employee well-being. Mediation analysis further confirmed that work-life balance partially mediated the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and well-being, accounting for 30.68% of the total effect. The findings suggest that ambidextrous leadership enhances employee well-being both directly and indirectly by improving employees' capacity to manage work and personal demands. The study contributes to behavioral and organizational research by demonstrating the relevance of balanced leadership practices in promoting employee well-being in manufacturing contexts.

**Keywords:** *Ambidextrous leadership; work-life balance; employee well-being; new-generation employees; manufacturing sector; Sichuan China*

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### 1. Introduction

Employee well-being has become an increasingly important concern in contemporary organizational research and practice, particularly in industries where productivity demands, technological change, and workforce expectations intersect. In manufacturing companies, leaders are expected not only to sustain efficiency and operational discipline but also to respond to the changing needs of younger employees who value autonomy, personal growth, meaningful work, and work-life balance. This issue is especially relevant in Sichuan, China, where manufacturing firms operate within a demanding industrial environment shaped by innovation pressures, labor intensity, and the continued entry of new-generation employees into the workforce.

New-generation employees, particularly those born after 1990, differ from earlier cohorts in their work values and expectations. They tend to place greater importance on flexibility, self-development, recognition, and the integration of professional and personal life. While traditional manufacturing leadership systems often emphasize compliance, productivity, and control, such approaches may be insufficient for maintaining employee motivation and well-being among younger workers. This creates a need to examine leadership approaches that can balance structure with adaptability, efficiency with innovation, and organizational performance with employee-centered outcomes.

Ambidextrous leadership offers a relevant framework for addressing these competing demands. It refers to a leadership approach that integrates exploratory and exploitative behaviors. Exploratory leadership encourages innovation, experimentation, autonomy, and learning from mistakes, while exploitative leadership emphasizes efficiency, rule adherence, monitoring, and task completion. Through this dual orientation, ambidextrous leaders may help organizations maintain operational stability while also encouraging flexibility and adaptation. Prior studies have associated ambidextrous leadership with innovation, creativity, and organizational performance; however, its relationship with employee well-being remains less fully developed, particularly in manufacturing contexts and among younger employees.

The present study focuses on the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being, with work-life balance examined as a mediating variable. Work-life balance is a critical mechanism because it reflects the extent to which employees can manage work demands alongside family, social, personal, and psychological needs. In high-pressure manufacturing settings, leadership behaviors may influence employee well-being not only directly, but also indirectly by shaping employees' perceived ability to maintain balance between work and personal life. A leader who supports both task accomplishment and adaptive flexibility may help reduce resource depletion, role conflict, and psychological strain among employees.

The study is anchored on Conservation of Resources Theory, which explains that individuals seek to acquire, retain, and protect valuable resources such as time, energy, autonomy, psychological security, and social support. From this perspective, ambidextrous leadership may function as an organizational resource because it provides both direction and flexibility. Work-life balance, in turn, may serve as a resource-preserving condition that helps employees manage competing demands and sustain well-being. This theoretical lens is appropriate for examining how leadership behaviors may translate into improved employee outcomes through the preservation and enhancement of personal and work-related resources.

Although existing literature has examined ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and well-being separately, limited research has investigated the combined relationship among these variables within the context of Sichuan manufacturing firms. In particular, the mediating role of work-life balance between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being remains underexplored. This gap is significant because manufacturing companies increasingly need leadership strategies that address both organizational performance and employee sustainability. Understanding this relationship can provide useful insights for managers, human resource practitioners, and organizational leaders seeking to improve employee well-being among younger workers in manufacturing environments.

This study therefore aimed to examine the relationship between ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and well-being among new-generation employees in manufacturing companies in Sichuan, China. Specifically, it sought to: (1) determine the effect of ambidextrous leadership on employee well-being; (2) examine the effect of ambidextrous leadership on work-life balance; (3) determine the relationship between work-life balance and employee well-being; and (4) assess whether work-life balance mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### ***2.1 Ambidextrous Leadership and Employee Outcomes***

Ambidextrous leadership is grounded in the broader concept of organizational ambidexterity, which refers to the capacity to balance exploration and exploitation in response to complex and changing environments. March (1991) originally distinguished exploration as the pursuit of new knowledge, experimentation, and innovation, while exploitation refers to refinement, efficiency, implementation, and the use of existing competencies. Applied to leadership, this duality suggests that effective leaders must be able to encourage openness and experimentation while also ensuring structure, discipline, and task execution.

Rosing et al. (2011) conceptualized ambidextrous leadership as consisting of opening behaviors, closing behaviors, and temporal flexibility. Opening behaviors encourage creativity, risk-taking, independent thinking, and tolerance for mistakes, while closing behaviors emphasize goal monitoring, rule enforcement, corrective action, and implementation discipline. This leadership style is therefore particularly relevant in manufacturing organizations, where leaders must sustain efficiency while adapting to technological change and workforce expectations.

Previous studies have shown that ambidextrous leadership contributes to employee creativity, team innovation, and organizational performance. Zacher and Wilden (2014) linked ambidextrous leadership with employee innovation, while Zacher and Rosing (2015) found that ambidextrous leadership supports team innovation. Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004) similarly emphasized that ambidextrous organizational contexts improve performance by enabling both adaptability and alignment. Luo et al. (2018) further showed that ambidextrous leadership can strengthen organizational innovation and responsiveness through behavioral integration and risk propensity. However, the literature also indicates that ambidextrous leadership may create tension when employees experience role ambiguity or conflicting demands, especially when leaders shift between exploratory and exploitative expectations without adequate communication (Rosing et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2015). Thus, while ambidextrous leadership has clear performance and innovation benefits, its implications for employee well-being require closer examination. Comparable evidence from frontline retail employees suggests that adaptive leadership practices are closely associated with engagement indicators such as autonomy, growth opportunities, and teamwork, reinforcing the view that flexible leadership behaviors may shape employee-centered outcomes beyond task performance alone (Gonzales & Magnaye, 2026).

### ***2.2 Work-Life Balance and Employee Well-Being***

Work-life balance has evolved from earlier discussions of work-family conflict toward a broader concern with harmony between professional and personal domains. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) initially framed work-family conflict as the incompatibility between work and family roles. Later, Clark (2000) proposed work/family border theory, emphasizing how individuals negotiate boundaries between work and home. Greenhaus and Allen (2011) further advanced the concept of work-life balance by emphasizing satisfaction and effective functioning across multiple life roles.

Work-life balance is not limited to time allocation. It also involves psychological involvement, satisfaction, role coordination, and the availability of personal and organizational resources. Greenhaus et al. (2003) described work-life balance through time balance, involvement balance, and satisfaction balance, while Duxbury and Higgins (2001) emphasized role overload, work-to-family interference, and family-to-work interference. These perspectives suggest that work-life balance is both an individual experience and an organizational outcome shaped by work design, leadership behavior, and institutional support.

Empirical studies consistently associate work-life balance with positive employee outcomes. Allen et al. (2000) linked work-family conditions with job satisfaction, stress, and overall well-being, while Haar et al. (2014) found that work-life balance is associated with job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and mental health across cultures. Talukder et al. (2018) showed that supervisor support can improve work-life balance and job performance, while Presti et al. (2020) emphasized the role of organizational support in reducing work-family conflict and promoting balance. These findings indicate that work-life balance is not merely a personal lifestyle issue but a critical organizational mechanism through which leadership and workplace conditions influence well-being. In a related organizational behavior study, work environment support emerged as the strongest predictor of employee productivity, suggesting that supportive workplace conditions may operate as practical resources that strengthen employees' capacity to perform and adapt under work demands (Espelita & Atento, 2026).

### ***2.3 New-Generation Employees in Manufacturing Contexts***

New-generation employees have become an increasingly important workforce segment, particularly in rapidly changing industrial sectors. In the Chinese context, definitions vary, but many scholars characterize new-generation employees as those born after the 1980s or 1990s who entered the workforce during periods of economic reform, globalization, technological expansion, and improved educational access (Jiang et al., 2014; Zhang & Zhou, 2015). This study follows the narrower definition of new-generation employees as those born after 1990 and working in enterprises.

This cohort is often described as more educated, more adaptive to new technologies, and more responsive to flexibility, autonomy, and meaningful work than previous generations. Zhao et al. (2019), Li (2020), and Yang (2021) noted that younger Chinese employees tend to demonstrate stronger acceptance of innovation, more diverse value orientations, and a stronger preference for individuality and independence. These characteristics can be beneficial for firms seeking creativity and adaptability, but they may also challenge traditional managerial systems that rely heavily on compliance, hierarchy, and rigid control. This emphasis on meaningful work is consistent with evidence that employees' sense of meaning in work is positively associated with broader psychological resources such as presence of meaning and

growth mindset, indicating that employee well-being is partly shaped by how work is experienced as purposeful and developmental (Aguilar, 2026).

The manufacturing context intensifies these issues. Manufacturing firms must balance efficiency, standardization, productivity, and cost control with innovation, digitalization, and workforce retention. For younger employees, highly structured manufacturing environments may produce strain when organizational practices do not sufficiently support autonomy, recognition, career growth, or work-life balance. Waworuntu et al. (2022) emphasized that millennial and Generation Z employees tend to value work-life balance, job satisfaction, and meaningful performance outcomes. Therefore, leadership practices in manufacturing firms must adapt to the expectations of younger workers while preserving operational discipline. Ambidextrous leadership is relevant in this context because it allows leaders to combine exploratory flexibility with exploitative structure.

#### ***2.4 Conservation of Resources Theory and the Mediating Role of Work-Life Balance***

Conservation of Resources Theory provides a useful theoretical lens for explaining the relationships among ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and employee well-being. Hobfoll (1989) argued that individuals seek to obtain, retain, protect, and develop valuable resources, including time, energy, psychological stability, social support, autonomy, and material conditions. Stress occurs when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently replenished after investment. Within organizational settings, leadership and work systems may either conserve employee resources or intensify resource depletion.

Ambidextrous leadership can be interpreted as a workplace resource because it provides both support for adaptation and structure for task execution. Exploratory behaviors may increase psychological safety, autonomy, and creativity, while exploitative behaviors may reduce uncertainty by clarifying expectations, rules, and performance standards. When balanced properly, these leadership behaviors may prevent excessive resource loss by helping employees navigate complex work demands. However, when poorly managed, the dual demand for innovation and efficiency may create additional strain.

Work-life balance serves as a possible mediating mechanism because it reflects employees' ability to allocate and preserve personal resources across work and non-work domains. Employees who experience better work-life balance are more likely to maintain energy, psychological stability, family functioning, and life satisfaction. Haar et al. (2014) linked work-life balance with job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and mental health, while Sirgy and Lee (2023) emphasized its importance in explaining employee well-being. From the Conservation of Resources perspective, ambidextrous leadership may enhance well-being partly because it improves employees' capacity to manage work and personal demands. This supports the present study's mediation model, in which work-life balance functions as the pathway through which leadership contributes to employee well-being.

#### ***2.5 Synthesis and Literature Gaps***

The reviewed literature establishes that ambidextrous leadership is associated with innovation, creativity, team performance, and organizational adaptability (Rosing et al., 2011; Zacher & Wilden, 2014; Zacher & Rosing, 2015; Luo et al., 2018). It also shows that work-life balance is closely related to job satisfaction, mental health, life satisfaction, and employee well-being (Allen et al., 2000; Greenhaus et al., 2003; Haar et al., 2014; Talukder et al., 2018). Studies on new-generation employees further indicate that younger workers tend to value flexibility, autonomy, meaningful work, and work-life integration more strongly than previous cohorts (Zhao et al., 2019; Li, 2020; Waworuntu et al., 2022).

Despite these contributions, several gaps remain. First, much of the ambidextrous leadership literature focuses on innovation and performance rather than employee well-being. Second, work-life balance is often examined as a direct antecedent of well-being, but less frequently as a mediating mechanism between leadership style and well-being. Third, limited research has examined these relationships among new-generation employees in Chinese manufacturing firms, particularly in Sichuan. Finally, the manufacturing sector presents a distinctive context because it combines operational rigidity, technological change, and increasing pressure to retain younger employees. This study addresses these gaps by examining whether work-life balance mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and well-being among new-generation manufacturing employees in Sichuan. Adjacent literature also suggests that generational expectations, burnout pressures, and leadership responsiveness should be treated as interconnected rather than isolated concerns, supporting a more systems-oriented view of employee well-being and workforce sustainability (Bermido et al., 2025).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and employee well-being among new-generation employees in manufacturing companies in Sichuan, China. The design was appropriate because the study sought to test hypothesized relationships among measurable variables using statistical procedures. Specifically, the study examined the direct effects of ambidextrous leadership on work-life balance and employee well-being, the relationship between work-life balance and employee well-being, and the mediating role of work-life balance in the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and well-being.

The study was anchored on Conservation of Resources Theory, which explains that employees seek to acquire, preserve, and protect personal and work-related resources such as time, energy, psychological stability, autonomy, and social support. Within this framework, ambidextrous leadership was treated as the independent variable, work-life balance as the mediating variable, and employee well-being as the dependent variable.

#### **3.2 Participants of the Study**

The participants were new-generation employees working in manufacturing companies in Sichuan Province, China. For this study, new-generation employees referred to workers born after 1990 who were currently employed in manufacturing firms. The inclusion criteria required respondents to be born after 1990, employed in a manufacturing company in Sichuan, and working in their current company for at least six months. Employees who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study.

A total of 255 valid responses were included in the final analysis. The sample consisted of 126 male respondents and 129 female respondents, showing an almost balanced gender distribution. Most respondents were between 20 and 34 years old, confirming that the sample corresponded with the study's target population of new-generation employees.

#### **3.3 Sampling Technique**

The study used criterion-based purposive sampling, with screening questions applied to ensure that respondents met the required criteria of being born after 1990, working in a manufacturing company in Sichuan, and having at least six months of work experience in their current company. The original thesis manuscript indicated the use of stratified random sampling; however, based on the online survey distribution procedure, criterion-based purposive sampling more accurately describes the implemented sampling procedure unless separate documentation of proportional strata is available.

#### **3.4 Research Instrument**

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire composed of three major parts. The first part contained the questionnaire description, informed consent statement, and screening questions. The second part gathered demographic information, including gender, age, length of service, marital status, overtime frequency, participation in work-life balance programs, number of children, and average monthly income. The third part measured the study variables: ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and employee well-being.

Ambidextrous leadership was measured through two dimensions: exploratory leadership and exploitative leadership. Exploratory leadership included items related to encouraging experimentation, independent thinking, risk-taking, and learning from mistakes. Exploitative leadership included items related to monitoring goals, establishing rules, enforcing compliance, corrective action, and task completion.

Work-life balance was measured using items that assessed the extent to which respondents perceived that work and personal life demands did not interfere with one another. Employee well-being was measured using items related to job interest, job satisfaction, meaningful work, achievement, communication with family and friends, daily functioning, willingness to share time with others, personal confidence, time management, and perceived personal growth. All main variable items were rated using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

#### **3.5 Reliability and Validity of the Instrument**

The instrument demonstrated strong reliability and validity. The ambidextrous leadership scale obtained an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.938, with exploratory leadership at 0.923 and exploitative leadership at 0.920. The work-life balance

scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.953, while the well-being scale obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.947. These values exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Construct validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. The ambidextrous leadership scale produced a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.947, while work-life balance and well-being obtained KMO values of 0.977 and 0.968, respectively. Bartlett's tests of sphericity were significant across the scales, supporting the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis also showed acceptable to excellent model fit indices for the major constructs. Composite reliability values exceeded 0.70, and average variance extracted values exceeded 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity. The results further supported the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

### ***3.6 Data Gathering Procedure***

The data were gathered through an online survey administered using Sojump, a widely used online survey platform in China. The questionnaire link was distributed through email and social media channels to reach eligible respondents in Sichuan manufacturing companies. Before answering the questionnaire, participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Screening questions were placed at the beginning of the questionnaire to ensure that only qualified respondents participated in the study. Respondents who did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. After data collection, the responses were reviewed for completeness and consistency. Incomplete, ineligible, or irregular responses were removed before the final dataset was subjected to statistical analysis.

### ***3.7 Data Analysis***

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic profile of the respondents and the distribution of responses for the main study variables. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales.

Exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the underlying factor structure of the scales, while confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to verify the measurement model. Pearson correlation analysis was used to determine the strength and direction of relationships among ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and employee well-being.

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the direct relationships among the variables. Mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS approach with bootstrap resampling to determine whether work-life balance mediated the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being. The bootstrap mediation test used 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals. Mediation was considered significant when the confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero.

### ***3.8 Ethical Considerations***

Ethical considerations were observed in the conduct of the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could decline or withdraw from participation. The questionnaire did not require personally identifying information, and all responses were treated with confidentiality. The data were used only for academic research purposes and were reported in aggregate form to protect the identity and privacy of the respondents.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### ***4.1 Respondent Characteristics***

The study analyzed 255 valid responses from new-generation employees working in manufacturing companies in Sichuan, China. The respondents were almost evenly distributed by gender, with 126 males or 49% and 129 females or 51%. This balanced distribution suggests that the findings were not heavily skewed toward one gender group.

Most respondents belonged to the younger working-age population. Employees aged 20-24 years old accounted for 35%, followed by those aged 25-29 years old at 34%, and those aged 30-34 years old at 22%. Respondents below 20 years old represented only 9% of the sample. This confirms that the sample was aligned with the study's focus on new-generation employees.

In terms of tenure, the largest group had been employed in their current company for 7-12 months or 32%, followed by those with 1-2 years of service at 25% and 3-6 months at 22%. The sample therefore reflected employees with relatively recent but sufficient workplace exposure. Regarding marital status, 66% were single, 28% were married, 4% were divorced, and 1% were widowed. This pattern is consistent with the age profile of the respondents.

Work intensity was also evident in the sample. Only 10% reported never working overtime, while 35% worked overtime three to five times per month, 25% worked overtime six to ten times per month, and 12% worked overtime more than ten times per month. Participation in company work-life balance programs was moderate: 45% reported participation, 33% did not participate, and 22% were not aware of such programs. This indicates that while work-life balance initiatives were present, awareness and participation remained uneven.

#### 4.2 Descriptive and Psychometric Results of the Main Variables

The descriptive results showed generally favorable perceptions of exploratory leadership, exploitative leadership, work-life balance, and well-being. Exploratory leadership items received moderate to high agreement, with item means ranging from 3.51 to 3.63. This indicates that respondents generally perceived their leaders as encouraging experimentation, independent thinking, risk-taking, and learning from mistakes. Exploitative leadership items also showed moderate agreement, with means ranging from 3.43 to 3.51, suggesting that respondents also experienced rule enforcement, task monitoring, and structured work expectations.

Work-life balance items yielded higher mean scores, ranging from 3.69 to 3.81, suggesting that respondents generally perceived manageable boundaries between work and personal life. Well-being items similarly showed favorable results, with means ranging from 3.71 to 3.81, indicating positive perceptions of job interest, achievement, personal growth, confidence, and daily functioning.

The reliability and validity results confirmed that the scales used in the study were psychometrically acceptable. Table 1 summarizes the major reliability and validity indicators retained for the journal version.

**Table 1.** Reliability and Validity Indicators of the Main Constructs

Construct Dimension	Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$	KMO	AVE	CR
Exploratory leadership	7	0.923	0.947	0.633	0.924
Exploitative leadership	7	0.920	0.947	0.625	0.921
Work-life balance	14	0.953	0.977	0.593	0.948
Well-being	12	0.947	0.968	0.609	0.949

*Note.* KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy; AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 across all constructs, indicating strong internal consistency. The KMO values also exceeded 0.90, confirming that the data were highly suitable for factor analysis. The AVE values were above 0.50 and the composite reliability values exceeded 0.70, supporting the convergent validity and reliability of the constructs. These results justify the use of the measures in subsequent correlation, regression, and mediation analyses.

#### 4.3 Relationship among Ambidextrous Leadership, Work-Life Balance, and Well-Being

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the initial relationships among ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and employee well-being. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Main Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Ambidextrous leadership	13.149	6.589	—		
2. Work-life balance	3.750	0.969	0.546**	—	
3. Well-being	6.439	1.665	0.604**	0.568**	—

Note. \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2 shows that ambidextrous leadership was positively and significantly correlated with well-being ( $r = 0.604$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and work-life balance ( $r = 0.546$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Work-life balance was also positively correlated with well-being ( $r = 0.568$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These findings provide preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships among the three variables. Specifically, employees who perceived stronger ambidextrous leadership also tended to report better work-life balance and higher well-being.

#### 4.4 Regression and Mediation Results

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the direct effects of ambidextrous leadership on well-being and work-life balance, as well as the effect of work-life balance on well-being. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Hierarchical Regression Results

Model	Dependent Variable	Predictor	$\beta$	t	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	F
M1	Well-being	Ambidextrous leadership	0.604	12.046***	0.364	0.362	145.091***
M2	Work-life balance	Ambidextrous leadership	0.546	10.364***	0.298	0.295	107.420***
M3	Well-being	Ambidextrous leadership	0.418	7.472***	0.445	0.441	101.178***
M3	Well-being	Work-life balance	0.339	6.063***	0.445	0.441	101.178***

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Model 1 showed that ambidextrous leadership had a significant positive effect on well-being ( $\beta = 0.604$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the first hypothesis. Model 2 showed that ambidextrous leadership also had a significant positive effect on work-life balance ( $\beta = 0.546$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the second hypothesis. Model 3 showed that when both ambidextrous leadership and work-life balance were entered as predictors of well-being, both remained significant. Ambidextrous leadership continued to predict well-being ( $\beta = 0.418$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while work-life balance also significantly predicted well-being ( $\beta = 0.339$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This supports the third hypothesis and suggests the possibility of partial mediation.

A bootstrap mediation test was then conducted to determine whether work-life balance mediated the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and well-being. The results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Bootstrap Mediation Results for Work-Life Balance

Effect Relationship	Effect Size	SE	95% Confidence Interval	Proportion of Total Effect
Total effect	0.603	0.0127	[0.505, 0.702]	—
Direct effect	0.418	0.0142	[0.308, 0.529]	69.32%

Effect Relationship	Effect Size	SE	95% Confidence Interval	Proportion of Total Effect
Indirect effect through work-life balance	0.185	0.0118	[0.104, 0.283]	30.68%

Note. The indirect effect is significant because the 95% confidence interval does not include zero.

The mediation results show that the indirect effect of ambidextrous leadership on well-being through work-life balance was significant because the 95% confidence interval did not include zero. The indirect effect accounted for 30.68% of the total effect, while the direct effect remained significant. This confirms that work-life balance partially mediated the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being.

The hypothesis testing results are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Ambidextrous leadership is positively related to employee well-being.	Supported
H2	Ambidextrous leadership is positively related to work-life balance.	Supported
H3	Work-life balance is positively related to employee well-being.	Supported
H4	Work-life balance mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being.	Supported

The results support all four hypotheses. Ambidextrous leadership directly improved employee well-being and work-life balance, while work-life balance also contributed positively to well-being. The mediation analysis further showed that ambidextrous leadership enhanced well-being partly by improving work-life balance.

#### 4.5 Discussion

The findings indicate that ambidextrous leadership is positively associated with employee well-being among new-generation employees in Sichuan manufacturing companies. This result is consistent with the ambidextrous leadership literature, which argues that leaders who can balance exploratory and exploitative behaviors are better able to respond to complex organizational demands (Rosing et al., 2011; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). In the present study, ambidextrous leadership appears to function not only as a performance-oriented leadership approach but also as a supportive condition for employee well-being.

The positive effect of ambidextrous leadership on work-life balance is especially important in the manufacturing context. Manufacturing firms often operate under structured schedules, productivity pressures, and operational routines. In such settings, purely exploitative leadership may sustain efficiency but may also intensify employee strain if not balanced by autonomy, support, and flexibility. The findings suggest that when leaders combine task discipline with openness, support, and adaptive behavior, employees perceive greater capacity to manage both work and non-work demands. This aligns with the view that leadership practices can shape employees' access to psychological and organizational resources.

The significant relationship between work-life balance and well-being supports prior literature showing that employees who experience better balance between work and personal life tend to report greater job satisfaction, mental health, and life satisfaction (Allen et al., 2000; Greenhaus et al., 2003; Haar et al., 2014). In this study, work-life balance was not merely a separate outcome but a pathway through which leadership influenced well-being. The mediation result shows that 30.68% of the total effect of ambidextrous leadership on well-being was transmitted through work-life balance.

This suggests that leadership improves well-being partly by helping employees conserve time, energy, and psychological resources.

The findings are also consistent with Conservation of Resources Theory. Hobfoll's theory emphasizes that individuals seek to acquire and protect valued resources, and stress occurs when these resources are threatened or depleted. Ambidextrous leadership may serve as a resource-generating condition because it provides employees with both direction and flexibility. Work-life balance, in turn, may protect employees from resource depletion by allowing them to manage competing work and personal demands more effectively. From this perspective, the study shows that leadership practices can contribute to employee well-being not only through direct support but also through the creation of conditions that preserve employees' personal and psychological resources.

For new-generation employees, these findings are particularly relevant. Younger workers tend to value autonomy, flexibility, personal development, and meaningful work (Waworuntu et al., 2022). In manufacturing environments where work systems may remain hierarchical and structured, ambidextrous leadership may provide a useful middle path. It allows organizations to maintain order and productivity while responding to employees' expectations for independence, growth, and work-life integration. This is especially important in retaining younger workers, who may be less willing to remain in workplaces that fail to support their broader well-being.

Overall, the results demonstrate that ambidextrous leadership is a meaningful predictor of both work-life balance and employee well-being. However, the findings should be interpreted within the limits of the study's cross-sectional design. While the statistical model supports significant relationships and partial mediation, causal claims should remain cautious. The results nevertheless provide empirical evidence that leadership development and work-life balance initiatives should be treated as complementary strategies for improving employee well-being in manufacturing companies.

## **5. Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

This study examined the relationship among ambidextrous leadership, work-life balance, and employee well-being among new-generation employees in manufacturing companies in Sichuan, China. Based on the findings, ambidextrous leadership was found to be significantly and positively associated with employee well-being. This indicates that when leaders combine exploratory behaviors, such as encouraging innovation, autonomy, experimentation, and learning from mistakes, with exploitative behaviors, such as clarifying rules, monitoring goals, and ensuring task completion, employees tend to report higher levels of well-being.

The study also found that ambidextrous leadership significantly improved work-life balance. This suggests that leadership practices that balance flexibility and structure may help employees manage professional and personal demands more effectively. In manufacturing environments where work schedules, productivity targets, and overtime demands can create pressure, ambidextrous leadership appears to support employees by providing both direction and adaptive support.

Work-life balance was likewise found to have a significant positive relationship with employee well-being. Employees who perceived better balance between work and personal life also reported stronger well-being. This finding confirms that work-life balance is not merely an ancillary benefit but an important determinant of employee psychological and occupational outcomes.

Finally, the study confirmed that work-life balance partially mediated the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and employee well-being. The indirect effect accounted for 30.68% of the total effect, while the direct effect of ambidextrous leadership on well-being remained significant. This means that ambidextrous leadership enhances employee well-being in two ways: directly, by creating a supportive and balanced leadership environment, and indirectly, by improving employees' ability to maintain work-life balance.

### **5.2 Recommendations**

Based on the findings, manufacturing companies in Sichuan should strengthen leadership development programs that cultivate ambidextrous leadership competencies. Managers should be trained to balance exploratory and exploitative behaviors rather than relying exclusively on control-oriented or innovation-oriented leadership. This includes developing

skills in employee empowerment, task monitoring, feedback-giving, autonomy support, performance guidance, and adaptive decision-making.

Organizations should also improve the implementation and communication of work-life balance programs. Although some respondents reported participation in such programs, a considerable portion either did not participate or were unaware of their existence. This suggests that companies should not only design work-life balance policies but also ensure that employees clearly understand, access, and use them. Flexible scheduling, reasonable overtime management, family-supportive leave arrangements, rest periods, and workload monitoring may help reduce strain and improve well-being.

Manufacturing firms should also integrate work-life balance into supervisory performance expectations. Leaders should be assessed not only on production outcomes but also on their ability to support employee sustainability, reduce unnecessary work-life conflict, and maintain psychologically healthy work environments. This may be done through employee feedback systems, 360-degree evaluations, and periodic leadership climate assessments.

Human resource departments should establish regular well-being monitoring systems. These may include employee satisfaction surveys, stress and workload assessments, exit interviews, and consultation mechanisms that allow younger employees to express concerns regarding workload, leadership practices, and career development. Since new-generation employees tend to value personal growth, autonomy, and meaningful work, well-being initiatives should be linked with career development, recognition systems, mentoring, and participatory communication.

Future researchers may extend this study by using longitudinal designs to examine whether ambidextrous leadership and work-life balance predict changes in employee well-being over time. Additional studies may also compare different manufacturing subsectors, organizational sizes, or regions in China to determine whether the relationships found in this study remain stable across different industrial and cultural contexts. Future research may also include moderating variables such as organizational culture, workload intensity, perceived organizational support, job autonomy, and psychological safety.

### ***5.3 Implications of the Study***

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on ambidextrous leadership by extending its relevance beyond innovation, creativity, and performance outcomes. The findings show that ambidextrous leadership is also relevant to employee-centered outcomes, particularly work-life balance and well-being. This broadens the application of ambidextrous leadership theory in organizational behavior and human resource management.

The study also supports the relevance of Conservation of Resources Theory in explaining how leadership affects well-being. Ambidextrous leadership may function as an organizational resource because it provides employees with both structure and flexibility. Work-life balance, in turn, helps employees conserve personal resources such as time, energy, psychological stability, and social functioning. The mediation result suggests that leadership improves well-being partly by protecting employees from resource depletion.

Practically, the study implies that manufacturing companies should not treat employee well-being as separate from leadership practice. Leadership development, work-life balance policy, and well-being management should be integrated into a coherent human resource strategy. For new-generation employees, especially those working in demanding manufacturing environments, well-being may depend heavily on whether leaders can balance productivity expectations with autonomy, support, and flexibility.

For managerial practice, the findings indicate that ambidextrous leadership can help organizations respond to the dual challenge of maintaining operational discipline while supporting employee well-being. This is particularly important in manufacturing firms undergoing technological change, labor restructuring, and generational workforce transition. Companies that invest in ambidextrous leadership and work-life balance systems may be better positioned to retain younger employees, reduce burnout risks, and sustain long-term workforce engagement.

For policy and institutional practice, the study suggests that employee well-being programs should move beyond generic welfare provisions. Work-life balance policies must be actively implemented, communicated, and supported by leaders at the supervisory and managerial levels. In this sense, leadership behavior becomes a critical mechanism through which formal organizational policies are translated into actual employee experience.

## 6. References

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