

Original Article (Quantified)

Presenting a structural model of the effect of strategic leadership and innovative organizational climate on the voice of employees with the mediating role of work ethic maturity in technical and professional universities of West Azerbaijan province

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Receive:

11 June 2025

Revise:

16 September 2025

Accept:

17 February 2026

Keywords:

Self-leadership,
Strategic Thinking,
Organizational
Legitimacy,
Adaptability,
Individual-
Organization Fit

Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the modeling of the effect of self-leadership and strategic thinking on organizational legitimacy with the mediating role of adaptability and individual-organization fit. The research method is applicable in terms of its purpose, quantitative in terms of its implementation method, and descriptive-survey in terms of its nature, and of causal type. The statistical population of the study includes 216 employees of the General Directorate of Sports and Youth Organization, of which 139 people were estimated as a statistical sample based on the Cochran formula and selected randomly. Standard questionnaires of self-leadership (Neck and Houghton, 2006), strategic thinking (Lydka, 1998), organizational legitimacy (Elzabek, 1994), adaptability (Denison, 1996), and person-organization fit (Scroggins, 2008) were used to collect data. Structural equation modeling and partial least squares (PLS3) were used to analyze the data. The results showed that self-leadership, with the mediating role of adaptability and person-organization fit, has a significant effect on organizational legitimacy. Also, strategic thinking, with the mediating role of adaptability and person-organization fit, has a significant effect on organizational legitimacy. In line with the research results, it can be concluded that investing in the development of self-leadership skills and enhancing the strategic thinking capacity of employees can provide the basis for improving adaptability and improving the degree of individual fit with the organization, and in this way, significantly increase the perceived legitimacy among employees and stakeholders. This can lead to strengthening internal cohesion, increasing organizational trust, and improving the organization's position in internal and external environments.

Please cite this article as (APA): Beikzad, J. (2026). Presenting a structural model of the effect of strategic leadership and innovative organizational climate on the voice of employees with the mediating role of work ethic maturity in technical and professional universities of West Azerbaijan province. *Management and Educational Perspective*, 8(1), 252-281.



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jmep.2026.529853.1527>



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Publisher: Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Organizations that have high legitimacy, while having easier access to vital resources, benefit from broader social support, and appear more resilient to crises and environmental changes (Wu et al., 2023). Legitimacy finds meaning not only in compliance with laws and legal requirements, but also in the moral, cultural, and social perception of the organization's actions and can play a decisive role in the continued existence and effective performance of the organization (Zheng et al., 2023).

Among these, self-leadership, as one of the new individual competencies, plays an important role in promoting organizational legitimacy. Unlike common leadership styles that emphasize symbolic behaviors of leaders and their impact on employees, self-leadership focuses on achieving self-direction and self-motivation using a set of behavioral and cognitive strategies (Liu et al., 2023). Self-leaders use strategies such as personal goal setting, intrinsic reward, self-observation, and challenge seeking, and demonstrate responsible and effective behaviors. Such behaviors not only improve individual performance, but also represent the ethical and professional values of the organization and have a positive impact on stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's credibility and competence (Krampitz et al., 2023). Meanwhile, strategic thinking, as an advanced cognitive competency, represents the ability to understand complex relationships, analyze future-oriented issues, and make decisions in line with the organization's long-term goals. People who have strategic thinking can understand the long-term consequences of decisions and actions, analyze environmental opportunities and threats, and develop appropriate strategies to achieve the organization's macro goals (AlQershi, 2024). In this regard, one of the positive consequences of self-leadership and strategic thinking at the individual level is increased ability to adapt to changing and complex organizational conditions. Adaptability refers to an individual's ability to deal with unstable conditions, organizational changes, and new challenges (Hessari et al., 2025). Adaptable employees can quickly adapt to new technologies, structures, or procedures and use these changes as an opportunity for learning and growth (Nakra & Kashyap, 2023). People who have the ability to self-lead usually have more intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, and self-control, which increase their adaptability in complex situations (Nurimansjah, 2023). On the other hand, today, a large part of the success and competitive advantage of organizations depends on the performance of human resources. With the increasing importance of human resources, managers have become more sensitive in selecting people, and the concept of "individual-organization fit" has become one of the main criteria in recruiting. This fit can have positive consequences for the organization and employees (Bai & Bai, 2024). Therefore, the main question of the present study is: what is the effect of self-leadership and strategic thinking on organizational legitimacy with the mediating role of adaptability and individual-organization fit in the General Directorate of Sports and Youth of East Azerbaijan Province?

Theoretical Framework

Self-leadership

Self-leadership refers to the process of influencing oneself, during which an individual achieves the self-direction and intrinsic motivation necessary to get things done (Liu et al., 2023).

Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking is the ability to look simultaneously at the past, present, and future to make effective decisions at the macro-organizational level (Valisoltani et al., 2023).

Organizational Legitimacy

Following Max Weber, Parsones (1951) developed the concept of legitimization and emphasized that organizations must have a legitimate demand for limited resources. In addition, the goals that organizations pursue must be aligned and compatible with the values of the broader social environment in which they operate (Salehi et al., 2024).

Adaptability

Adaptability is one of the key components for individual and organizational success in complex, dynamic, and constantly changing environments (Yen et al., 2023).

Person-organization fit

Person-organization fit is a concept that refers to the degree to which an individual's values, goals, beliefs, attitudes, and personality traits are consistent with the culture, values, and needs of the organization (Mehtap et al., 2024).

Bamiri et al. (2025) in a study examined the relationship between self-leadership and organizational culture with the quality of work life of education employees in Lordegan. The results showed that there is a relationship between self-leadership and the quality of life of education employees in Lordegan, and there is a relationship between organizational culture and the quality of work life of education employees in Lordegan.

Ghoreishi et al. (2025) studied the presentation of a native model of organizational self-leadership with an emphasis on education in non-governmental organizations, using a grounded theory approach, in the Teacher Insurance Company. Based on the results obtained, the native model of organizational self-leadership was calculated. In the output of the model fitting, the CMIN/DF index was obtained as 1.515. The comparative fit indices were more than 90 percent and the economic indices were also calculated as greater than 0.5. The RMSEA index was also 0.043, which is less than 0.05. Therefore, the structural model of the research was confirmed.

Research Methodology

The research method is applicable in terms of its purpose, quantitative in terms of its implementation method, and descriptive-survey in terms of its nature, and of causal type. The statistical population of the research includes 216 employees of the General Directorate of Sports and Youth Organization, of which 139 people were estimated as a statistical sample based on the Cochran formula and selected randomly by stratified sampling. Standard questionnaires of self-leadership (Neck and Houghton, 2006), strategic thinking (Lydka, 1998), organizational legitimacy (Elzabek, 1994), adaptability (Denison, 1996) and person-organization fit (Scroggins, 2008) were used to collect data.

Research findings

Structural equation modeling and partial least squares (PLS3) were used to analyze the data. The results showed that self-leadership, with the mediating role of adaptability and person-organization fit, has a significant effect on organizational legitimacy. Also, strategic thinking, with the mediating role of adaptability and person-organization fit, has a significant effect on organizational legitimacy. In line with the research results, it can be concluded that investing in developing self-leadership skills and enhancing the strategic thinking capacity of employees can provide the basis for improving adaptability and enhancing the degree of individual fit with the organization, and in this way, significantly increase the perceived legitimacy among employees and stakeholders. This can lead to strengthening internal cohesion, increasing organizational trust, and improving the organization's position in internal and external environments.



Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the modeling of the effect of self-leadership and strategic thinking on organizational legitimacy with the mediating role of adaptability and individual-organization fit. This finding is consistent with the results of Bamiri et al. (2025), Hessari et al. (2025), Aghababaei (2024), Tenschert et al. (2024), Inam et al. (2023), Bagheri et al. (2025), Wuryaningrat et al. (2024), AlQershi (2024), Rasoulzadeh & Roshan Qalb Deylami (2023), Yen et al. (2023), and Bitektine & Song (2023).

Considering the results of the research, it is suggested:

It is suggested that organizations use psychological assessment tools to identify the level of self-leadership and flexibility of employees at the beginning of employment and design workshops with a positive psychology and resilience approach for existing employees. Also, the creation of "intra-organizational learning networks" can help share successful experiences of self-leadership in changing situations, thereby enhancing the adaptability of individuals and ultimately the legitimacy of the organization.

It is suggested that the performance appraisal and human resource development processes be redesigned in a way that benefits from two-way feedback (employees to the organization and vice versa) to promote mutual understanding of shared expectations, values, and priorities.