

Indirect ambidextrous leadership as an alternative to direct ambidextrous leadership

Ambidextrous
leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to differentiate the ambidextrous leadership concept into direct and indirect types to provide an alternative when the requirements of direct ambidextrous leadership cannot be met.

Design/methodology/approach – Desk research is used in this paper to relate the ambidextrous leadership concept to the roles of leader and manager to more comprehensively determine the requirements for being a direct/indirect ambidextrously leading executive than is possible by referring only to opening and closing leadership or exploration and exploitation.

Findings – Special requirements in the context of ambidextrous leadership can be transferred from the top executive/chief executive officer to third parties, for example, some control tasks in the area of exploitation can be distributed among the top management team, enabling the top executive to focus on tasks such as developing an organisation-wide vision and its strategic implementation. Indirect ambidextrous leadership exists if the top executive distributes exploitation tasks to third parties. Direct ambidextrous leadership exists if the top executive assumes leadership in both the exploration and exploitation areas. This means that the demands on the top executive are different in direct ambidextrous leadership and in indirect ambidextrous leadership.

Originality/value – The literature has not yet focused on the differentiation between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership. This paper contributes towards closing this gap. The potential for indirect ambidextrous leadership can be essential for a company's success because in addition to direct ambidextrous leadership, it represents the possibility of creating a sustainable organisation in a changing market.

Keywords Direct ambidextrous leadership, Indirect ambidextrous leadership, Ambidextrous organisation, Organisational ambidexterity, Ambidextrous top executive, Shared leadership

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Some companies start with a vision and, over time, lose their way or are overtaken by the competition, as measured by economic metrics. For instance, the former market leader Blockbuster was overtaken by Netflix (Huddleston, 2020). Blockbuster rejected Netflix's business model, turned down a purchase offer of \$50m in 2000 (Hastings and Meyer, 2020; Huddleston, 2020; Randolph, 2019) and filed for bankruptcy in 2010 (Faber, 2010). Netflix, however, grew to a net income of \$5,116,228,000 in 2021 (Netflix, 2022). There are also visionaries who have benefitted others with their vision. For example, Tim Paterson developed the original version of the Microsoft Disk Operating System (MS-DOS) that Bill Gates and Paul Allen bought for approximately \$50,000 and sold through licencing agreements with IBM. Buchmann (2018) has described this as the deal of the century, because Microsoft earned from every PC sold, as MS-DOS was initially installed on every IBM computer; MS-DOS was one of Microsoft's most profitable products (Martin, 2018).



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The ambidextrous leadership concept may help stakeholders embrace the benefits of both exploration [exploring new opportunities, e.g. by means of radical/discontinuous innovations (Asif, 2017; Baškarada *et al.*, 2016; Berraies and Zine El Abidine, 2019)] and exploitation [using available resources optimally or efficiently (Carter, 2015; van Lieshout *et al.*, 2021)]. Ambidextrous leadership is intended to prevent an organisation from losing competitiveness due to a lack of radical, paradigm-shifting innovation (Blockbuster is an example of missed exploration) and to ensure all innovations are sufficiently exploited for organisational success (Paterson is an example of missed exploitation). Accordingly, ambidextrous leadership should ensure sustainable organisational success (Havermans *et al.*, 2015; Xiang *et al.*, 2019). In the short term, this is evaluated according to measures in the area of exploitation and in the long term, in relation to exploration (Berraies and Zine El Abidine, 2019; Zabiegalski and Marquardt, 2022). The chief executive officer (CEO) and the top management team (TMT) play an important role because creating an ambidextrous organisation is first and foremost a leadership task (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2016; Scheepers and Storm, 2019). This is because top executives influence the attitudes and behaviour of their employees (Berraies and Zine El Abidine, 2019). For example, they can foster ambidexterity as role models or as strategic decision makers (Venugopal *et al.*, 2017). In addition, in uncertain times and situations, as may frequently occur in the area of exploration, employees are more dependent on top executives because employees turn to their leaders for guidance during periods of uncertainty (Adobor *et al.*, 2021). For this reason, this paper focuses on the upper echelons of business organisations.

In this paper, the theoretical starting point is the ambidextrous leadership concept (Rosing *et al.*, 2011) used to promote organisational ambidexterity. In this area, a distinction can be made between structural and contextual ambidexterity. Structural ambidexterity refers to the organisational structure; exploration and exploitation can be carried out in separate organisational units (Maclean *et al.*, 2020; Zabiegalski and Marquardt, 2022). The TMT works in a targeted way to achieve company goals and takes the lead on integration and coordination (Hansen *et al.*, 2019; Papachroni *et al.*, 2015).

Another variation is *contextual ambidexterity*. This involves creating the behavioural capacity among employees for efficient cooperation that leads to synergy effects and cohesion in working styles to achieve the vision/strategic goals (alignment) while simultaneously taking an adaptive approach to change when necessary (adaptability) across an entire business unit (Birkinshaw and Gibson, 2004; Dutta and Guha, 2015).

Contextual and structural ambidexterity can be combined under the heading *organisational ambidexterity* (Zabiegalski and Marquardt, 2022). Both aspects of contextual ambidexterity (adaptability and alignment) can support the two elements of structural ambidexterity (exploration and exploitation); thus, it is possible for contextual ambidexterity to co-exist with structural (and also temporal/sequential) ambidexterity (Birkinshaw and Gibson, 2004; Dutta and Guha, 2015). When exploration or exploitation is discussed later in this work, a concomitant alignment and adaptability are assumed.

1.1 Design/methodology/approach

This paper uses desk research, meaning a review of existing data sources (van Thiel, 2022), whereby triangulation (Denzin, 2017) as demonstrated in Laser (2021, 2022) is applied. In this way, the ambidextrous leadership concept involving opening and closing leadership is related to the roles of leader and manager to more comprehensively determine the requirements and tensions related to a direct/indirect ambidextrously leading executive than is possible by using only one concept. By examining the tasks that in principle could be delegated by the top executive, a prioritisation is created of the minimum requirements that

a top executive should meet and those that can be delegated to third parties to create an ambidextrous organisation via indirect ambidextrous leadership.

An inductive approach is used in this paper because there is no empirical data on indirect ambidextrous leadership that specifically refers to this concept. General statements on indirect ambidextrous leadership in this paper are based on individual observations on exploration and exploitation (Blockbuster, Tim Paterson and later in this paper, the so-called Intel trinity).

1.2 Contribution

The contribution of this paper lies in the conceptual differentiation between direct (the top executive promotes organisational ambidexterity by him- or herself) and indirect ambidextrous leadership (the top executive concentrates on leadership/exploration and transfers management/exploitation tasks to the TMT). It describes an alternative to direct ambidextrous leadership that allows decision makers to make a differentiated selection in practice when necessary. Unless there is an ambidextrous top executive who can directly lead ambidextrously, a top executive could be evaluated on his or her ability to implement indirect ambidextrous leadership.

1.3 Contents

In Section 2, tensions in the area of ambidexterity are explored, and a relationship to the roles of leader and manager is established to show the usefulness of introducing indirect ambidextrous leadership and to prioritise the requirements to be met. In Section 3, different categories are presented (in particular, top executives for direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership) using the roles of leader and manager as well as opening leadership/exploration and closing leadership/exploitation. Section 4 then prioritises whether a top executive should be required to excel in exploration or exploitation if he or she is not equally capable in both areas. The extent to which it is possible to differentiate between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership using criteria (e.g. integrity, ambition) is considered in Section 5. Conclusions are drawn and the theoretical and practical implications are presented in Section 6. Finally, Section 7 discusses the limitations of this study as well as recommendations for future research.

2. Reasons to differentiate between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership

Exploitation in an organisation, which is characterised by the predictable outcomes of incremental process optimisation (Baškarada *et al.*, 2016; Berraies and Zine El Abidine, 2019; Papachroni *et al.*, 2015), is less risky than servicing new markets or radical/discontinuous innovation (exploration) (Baškarada *et al.*, 2016; Kafetzopoulos, 2021; Papachroni *et al.*, 2015) because the latter involves more uncertainty (March, 1991). For example, missing information could make it difficult to estimate to what extent and at what price new products or services will be acceptable to customers. This may mean more enthusiasm and less resistance to exploitation than to exploration (Brix, 2019; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2016). Along with the tension between exploration and exploitation at an organisational level, a similar tension exists at the individual one, in that the requirements of ambidextrous leadership placed on top executives are sometimes of an opposing but complementary nature, for example, opening and closing leadership behaviour (Jia *et al.*, 2022; Kung *et al.*, 2020). As stated by Asif (2019, p. 412), “exploration/exploitation require different capabilities, mindset, strategies, methodologies, tools and techniques”.

Opening leadership behaviour means the leader/manager ensures an increased variance in employee behaviours, that is conducive to exploration (Alghamdi, 2018; Zacher and Rosing, 2015). *Closing leadership* behaviour means that the variance in employee behaviours is reduced, which is facilitative to exploitation (Alghamdi, 2018; Zacher and Rosing, 2015). Opening leadership promotes new ideas/innovation, and a subsequent switch to closing leadership will ensure that these ideas/innovations are implemented (Luu *et al.*, 2019). Ambidextrous top executives switch between opening and closing leadership as the situation requires (Rosing *et al.*, 2011).

If we consider that an individual's personality entails persistent dispositions (Lauer, 2014) that influence behaviour (Keller and Weibler, 2017) and are not easily changed (Mintzberg, 2013a, 2013b), then it becomes clear that an individual may not be able to easily switch from opening to closing leadership behaviour. This tension can also be illustrated using role theory, whereby the roles of leader and manager are related to ambidextrous leadership because there is a relationship between the roles of manager/leader and exploitation/exploration; that is, in exploitation, management skills may be especially important, while leadership skills are particularly necessary for exploration (Maier, 2015; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2016).

One attribute of a role is its boundaries. These are set up to organise and simplify the environment (Ashforth, 2001). The role boundary between leader and manager may need to be crossed by an ambidextrous top executive, but role identity can make this challenging. Role identity refers to the values, norms and goals associated with a role (Ashforth, 2001). For example, research has extensively dealt with the fact that the goals of the leader and manager roles are significantly different (Bennis, 2009; Kotter, 1990, 2012; Nielsen *et al.*, 1995). In the role of leader, a direction for change must be established, whereas as a manager, predictable results must be produced (Kotter, 1990). Different roles are accompanied by different requirements for the role holder (Bennis, 2009; Caldwell, 2003); for example, a leader should be visionary (Caldwell, 2003) and ambitious with regard to the long-term development of the organisation (Kotter, 1990), be willing to take risks and be unafraid of radical/discontinuous change (Laser, 2022). As a manager, it is important to control and plan (Kotter, 2012) in addition to being visionary, ambitious and courageous (Laser, 2022) with regard to incremental changes.

It is unlikely that an individual can fulfil all leadership tasks (Xie *et al.*, 2021) (e.g. a fluid switching of behaviour, values and norms), and thus, leadership tasks can be distributed among several people (shared leadership) within the framework of a TMT. Hence, in structuring the TMT, members with different educational and professional backgrounds should be selected (Yin *et al.*, 2022) to provide the possibility of indirect ambidextrous leadership as an alternative to an ambidextrous top executive/direct ambidextrous leadership, a possibility to which Sinha (2016) has already drawn attention.

The CEO and TMT play an important role in the success of an organisation (Bass and Bass, 2008), and therefore, the personal attributes of the CEO and top managers have a significant influence on the desired outcomes (Havaleschka, 1999), meaning that their respective skills, competencies and capabilities should be balanced (Jackson *et al.*, 2003). The board of directors or CEO should put together a TMT that meets the needs of the organisation (Havaleschka, 1999) and not one that satisfies their personal preferences. In the case of indirect ambidextrous leadership, criteria not fulfilled by the CEO should be met through recruitment to the TMT or by staff development to ensure that company leadership is well-rounded.

3. Direct vs indirect ambidextrous leadership

One way of countering the tension between exploration and exploitation is to explicitly ensure the top executives are selected or – if necessary and possible – developed to practise ambidextrous leadership, namely, *direct ambidextrous leadership*. However, if there are no

suitable candidates to choose from or if deviation from this is preferred, for example, because the top executive needs to concentrate on one area due to time restrictions, *indirect ambidextrous leadership* could possibly be useful as an alternative for promoting ambidextrous leadership, whereby executives may concentrate either on exploration or exploitation but engage in a joint effort to ensure both areas are promoted.

Figure 1 is an extension of Laser's (2022) figure and serves to elaborate and differentiate the categories; Laser's (2022) categorisations of leader, manager, leader and manager and ambidextrous executive are expanded upon in this paper through the introduction of direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership. The terms used in Figure 1 (e.g. exploration, leader role and opening leadership) represent different concepts that are helpful in the analysis of personal requirements to promote ambidexterity in an organisation. The concepts could also promote each other; for example, opening leadership fosters exploration, and the leadership role is relevant, in particular, for radical/discontinuous innovations (Laser, 2022; Maier, 2015; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2016). Related aspects of leadership style, leader and manager roles, and an orientation towards exploitation and exploration are juxtaposed in Figure 1 to obtain a conceptual aggregate. The diagonal axis represents the third dimension, which is

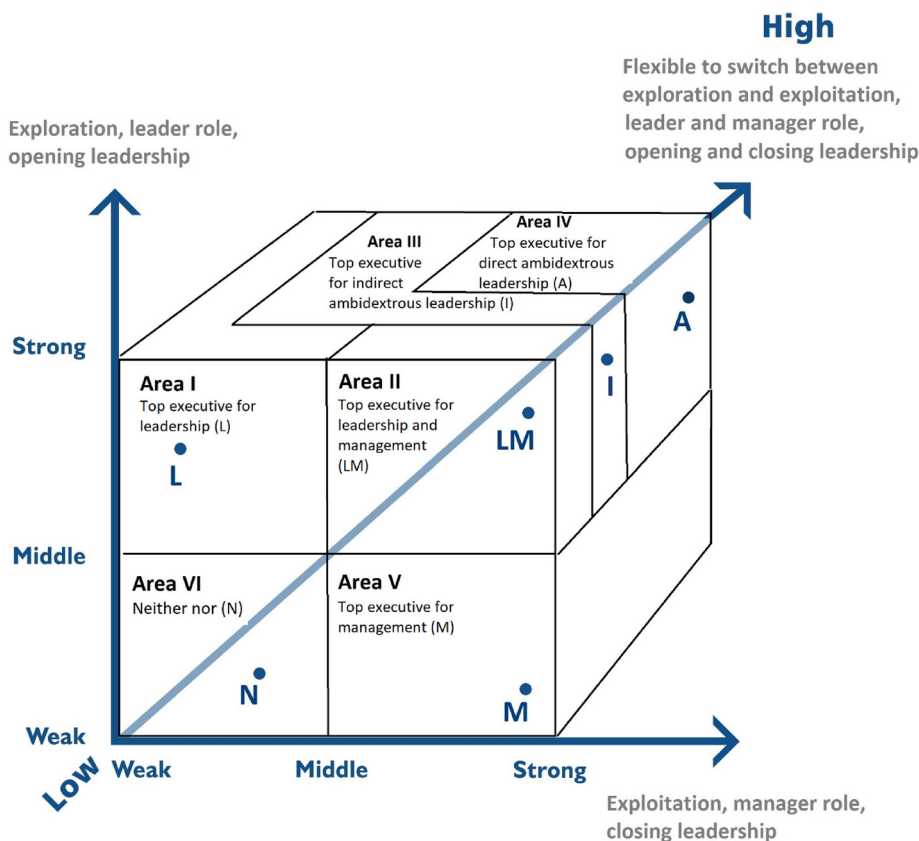


Figure 1.
Categories for top
executives from
concept aggregates of
organisational
ambidexterity,
ambidextrous
leadership and
management/
leadership roles

Source: The above figure is an adaptation of Laser (2022, p. 454)

the ability to switch between exploration and exploitation, the leader and manager roles and opening and closing leadership. The figure addresses ambidexterity on an individual level. The exploration and exploitation axes refer to the personal skills needed to advance the organisation in those areas. The position to which employees are assigned within an area in [Figure 1](#) relates to the analysis of criteria such as an ambition for exploration/leadership and exploitation/management. For example, if all criteria for ambidextrous leadership (ambition, integrity, courage) were fulfilled by an employee, this person would be assigned to the ideal ambidextrous executive position in the upper-right corner of Area IV.

The points L, LM, I, A and M in [Figure 1](#) represent persons who may be suitable for management/leadership tasks. They have different abilities, for example, A is especially qualified in both leadership and management. This person can also adapt his or her behaviour to drive exploration or exploitation as needed, facilitating the direct advancement of the organisation in either area. Persons falling within Area IV can be viewed as ambidextrous top executives. Those who are not currently suitable for exploitation/management/closing leadership and/or for exploration/leadership/opening leadership fall into Area VI.

In the following sections, the differentiation between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership will be discussed in more detail, and [Figure 1](#) will be further explained.

3.1 Direct ambidextrous leadership

Direct ambidextrous leadership means a top executive practising both opening and closing leadership behaviour, fulfilling the role requirements of leader and manager and switching between them as required (in [Figure 1](#), Area IV is intended to illustrate that these requirements are met by the top executive). This executive has the appropriate mindset for his or her own area of responsibility (including tasks other than staff management) and performs his or her duties accordingly. This is relevant because a top executive could, for example, propagate opening leadership and radical/discontinuous innovations, but may ultimately undermine them through careless investment decisions that would thwart the goal of ambidextrous leadership.

An executive who directly leads ambidextrously is personally promoting ambidexterity – implying knowledge put into practise – in both areas of exploration and exploitation. The tensions mentioned above are overcome, meaning the top executive can recognise and flexibly react to internal or external changes within the requirements for exploration and exploitation so that the balance between exploration and exploitation required for ambidextrous leadership ([Alblooshi et al., 2021](#); [Kafetzopoulos, 2021](#); [Kung et al., 2020](#)) is reached.

3.2 Indirect ambidextrous leadership

In indirect ambidextrous leadership, an executive does not personally promote the two areas of exploration and exploitation but instead concentrates on one area (exploration or exploitation). Tasks in the other area are picked up by other team members. Influence and leadership as a collective and shared activity emerges among team members, that is, shared leadership ([Hoch, 2014](#); [Lyndon et al., 2020](#); [Pearce and Conger, 2003](#)), which has some points of correlation with indirect ambidextrous leadership. Another characteristic of shared leadership is that the different abilities of the executives are used, and the focus is not just on the abilities of one executive ([Ensley et al., 2006](#); [Fausing et al., 2015](#); [Yukl, 1999](#)). This is the inverse of vertical leadership, in which a single person leads a team ([Lyndon et al., 2020](#)). Shared leadership may be adopted when complex and dynamic environments do not allow leaders to be skilled in all corporate areas ([Binci et al., 2016](#)). However, this does not mean that shared leadership makes vertical leadership superfluous ([Han et al., 2021](#)). Instead, the

leadership approaches complement each other (Fausing *et al.*, 2015). According to Li (2013), in a heterogeneous team, connectedness, trust and a shared vision can moderate the link between team diversity and organisational ambidexterity.

An example of this is the so-called Intel trinity (Malone, 2014) involving Robert Noyce, Gordon Moore and Andy Grove. Robert Noyce (cofounder of Intel) was a great leader who was smart and charismatic, but he and Gordon Moore (another cofounder of Intel) were bad managers who did not demand discipline from their employees (Isaacson, 2014) and avoided face-to-face confrontations with them (Malone, 2014). This shortcoming was compensated for by the appointment of Andy Grove (Isaacson, 2014; Malone, 2014).

In Figure 1, Area III shows an example of the requirements a top executive must meet for indirect ambidextrous leadership. Area III does not start on the diagonal where the value is low because a key criterion of the ambidextrous leadership concept is the ability to react flexibly to changing conditions. Even if top executives do not have to perform all tasks by themselves in the indirect ambidextrous leadership concept (thus, the flexibility requirements are not as high as in direct ambidextrous leadership), flexibility in switching between exploitation and exploration is still necessary so that the appropriate resources and freedom required by a given situation are provided; for instance, the top executives at Blockbuster could have made the decision to invest in Netflix without having to manage the new area of business themselves. If, for example, candidates in Area II, leader-managers, with very little flexibility on the diagonal to switch between the corresponding areas, were to be considered for the top executive roles, the right balance between exploration and exploitation might not be sustainable. Foresight is needed to spot new trends and opportunities, and recognising and responding to these trends and opportunities demands a corresponding level of flexibility. Cues from the external and internal organisational environment that trigger the need for change must be identified and acted upon (Seah *et al.*, 2014).

The concept of indirect ambidextrous leadership is similar to the adaptive type, as it is characterised by maintaining the old and promoting the new, with solutions to challenges provided not only by the CEO but also collectively through distributed leadership (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009) due to the complex and dynamic nature of business environments (Megheirkouni and Mejeirkouni, 2020). An experimental mindset is necessary to try out new things, and people should be mobilised to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). Adaptive leadership involves the ability to handle ambiguity and complexity in new situations in which the available knowledge is not sufficient to manage the new situation (Santra and Alat, 2022). There are also differences between adaptive and ambidextrous leadership. In ambidextrous leadership, establishing a balance between exploration and exploitation is key as is the drive within the area of exploration for radical/discontinuous innovations, to expand into new areas of business (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2016; Zabiegalski and Marquardt, 2022). These concerns and their associated demands are not essential components of the adaptive leadership concept.

4. Prioritisation between exploration and exploitation

When a top executive does not meet the requirements for direct ambidextrous leadership, and indirect ambidextrous leadership is adopted, the question arises as to the area (exploration/leadership or exploitation/management) upon which the top executive/CEO should focus.

The theoretical option of employing a top executive as CEO who is strong in the role of manager and weak in the role of leader (Area V in Figure 1), and who then concentrates on his or her management duties and delegates leadership tasks from his or her own original area of responsibility to third parties, can be seen as virtually irrelevant because some leadership tasks

are usually a non-transferable obligation (e.g. developing and communicating visions and overarching organisational goals). This hypothetical scenario would lead to the paradox of leaders being led. Furthermore, managers are not responsible for dramatic, transformational shifts but rather for incremental, predictable changes (Kotter, 2012).

However, the area for indirect ambidextrous leadership does not begin at the weakest point within the exploitation dimension to acknowledge that without a minimum of (self) management skills, an executive's work would be unplanned and uncontrolled. If top executives have some management skills but are not fully capable of driving improvement in the areas of management/exploitation, then managers can be employed to complement the skills of these top executives/leaders. When this is the case, top executives in Area III (Figure 1) may become CEOs if they have a certain level of managerial skill and sensitivity to the importance of management.

Accordingly, unless he or she has particular strengths in both areas, a top executive tasked with promoting ambidextrous leadership in an organisation should first be selected based on their ability to promote exploration. This prioritisation can be seen in Figure 1 by the fact that Area III does not extend below the middle range for leadership requirements but does extend for management ones.

5. Differentiation possibilities between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership

Criteria for personality traits, behavioural characteristics, knowledge, experience and skills can be used to assign a candidate to the direct or indirect ambidextrous leadership area. The criteria taken as a basis for this assignation are diverse (Kafetzopoulos, 2022). No criterion can be dismissed as irrelevant for ambidextrous leadership. Even if the fulfilment of a particular criterion is less relevant at a given time, the relevance of this criterion could change, introducing the possibility that a necessary, rapid, flexible action may be jeopardised through a lack of the requirements to which this criterion relates. The flexibility to switch between exploration/opening leadership and exploitation/closing leadership is characteristic of ambidextrous leadership (Gerlach *et al.*, 2020).

Criteria such as integrity, fairness and honesty should be fulfilled in both the role of leader/in the area of exploration and in the role of manager/in the area of exploitation (Laser, 2022), whereby a differentiation can be made according to the degree of fulfilment. For example, it could be that person A meets the minimum level of integrity, but person B does not, which means that B is no longer considered in the selection process. The person with the best rating in this and other relevant criteria determined by, for example, the analytical hierarchy process (Laser, 2017; Saaty, 1990) would then be selected. This does not, however, lead to a clear differentiation between the candidate's ability to ambidextrously lead directly or indirectly. At first glance, a differentiation could be made in that the criteria ascribed more readily to the role of the leader (e.g. visionary) (Caldwell, 2003; Kotter, 2012) are weighted more heavily in relation to exploration than aspects attributed to exercising the manager role (e.g. organised) (Kotter, 2012) and thus to exploitation. The problem is that someone can and should be visionary in the role of manager. Accordingly, this is not sufficient for differentiation, and there are more similarities than differences between the roles of manager and leader (Jakubik, 2021). There are nonetheless some criteria (e.g. ambition) with different dimensions/requirements (e.g. exploitation and exploration), and it may be that not all potential dimensions always have to be met in every context. It may be that a top executive should meet certain requirements of a criterion in their role as leader/in the area of exploration but other aspects of that same criterion in the role of manager/in the area of exploitation, such as the criteria of vision, ambition, courage and risk-taking in

relation to incremental and radical/discontinuous changes (Laser, 2022). In their role as leaders or in exploration, top executives are responsible for implementing necessary radical/discontinuous changes (Kotter, 2012; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2016), so they should also have the requisite willingness to take risks, ambition, courage and vision. In the manager's role or in exploitation, however, incremental changes also need to be driven forward, hence the candidate should also be visionary, ambitious and have the necessary willingness to take risks. Table 1 was created by the author to illustrate potential categories.

With this differentiation, a distinction can be made between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership. A top executive is assigned to the area of "direct ambidextrous leadership" (Area IV in Figure 1) if he or she meets both the general and specific criteria in terms of incremental (exploitation) and radical/discontinuous changes (exploration). For example, an executive who did not meet the specific criteria related to the incremental changes could not take the lead in that area. In this case, these tasks could be delegated, which means that there is indirect ambidextrous leadership provided there is sufficient flexibility to allocate appropriate resources and the freedom needed to implement incremental changes.

6. Conclusions and implications

In the best-case scenario, persons strong in the areas of exploration and exploitation and an understanding of contingent adaptability and alignment would be placed in an executive position. However, given that the requirement profile for a manager/exploitation differs from that for a leader/exploration and that people have different strengths and weaknesses, it becomes understandable that some people are more suitable for exploration/the role of leader for radical/discontinuous change and others for exploitation/the role of manager for incremental change. For this reason, it makes sense to differentiate between exploration/exploitation and between the roles of leader and manager, with the proviso that the distinctions between these aspects are blurred and that a top executive should ideally be competent in both areas and roles. A differentiated candidate data evaluation is also important in a situation in which the ideal candidate does not exist, which, according to Mintzberg (2013a), reflects reality and, therefore, compromises must be made regarding the requirements. This raises the question of how an organisation can be ambidextrously

| Leadership style | Direct ambidextrous leadership | Indirect ambidextrous leadership |
|---|--|---|
| Specific criteria that differentiate between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership by relating them to incremental and radical/discontinuous change | Examples Visionary, ambitious, courageous and risk taking in regard to radical/discontinuous <i>and</i> incremental changes | Examples Visionary, ambitious, courageous and risk taking in regard to radical/discontinuous changes; <i>distribution</i> of the criteria visionary, ambitious and risk taking in regard to incremental changes <i>within</i> the TMT |
| General criteria that are not differentiated between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership | Examples Integrity, intelligence, creativity, empathy, fairness, authenticity, extraversion, pragmatism, transparency, ethical and honest | |

Source: Author's own work

Table 1.
Differentiation
between specific and
general criteria for
direct and indirect
ambidextrous
leadership

managed despite the possible lack of an ambidextrous top executive. As an alternative to direct ambidextrous leadership, a top executive with sufficient leadership strengths and skills in exploration who also possesses an appreciation of the importance of managerial competencies/exploitation and has some ability in this area and also has sufficient flexibility to switch between the two areas could also indirectly lead ambidextrously by creating the necessary conditions for an ambidextrous organisation and distributing the exploitation tasks to his or her team.

6.1 Theoretical implications

In this paper, the concept of indirect ambidextrous leadership is introduced, whereby the ideas of shared/distributed leadership are transferred to the ambidextrous leadership concept so that organisational ambidexterity can be promoted, even if there is no ambidextrous top executive to take on sole responsibility for the ambidextrous leadership of the organisation.

In theory, the criteria can be used in any scenario in which direct or indirect ambidextrous leadership is being considered. Care should be taken, however, to begin with a clear understanding of the criteria that relate to each category (exploration or exploitation) and how the criteria are to be met. Criteria can be selected to differentiate the appraisal process for either exploration or exploitation or for direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership, but individual criteria may vary according to the required approach. The criterion of ambition, for example, can be linked to the area of exploration as well as to that of exploitation, thereby making a differentiation between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership possible.

6.2 Practical implications

Checking a potential candidate for top executive/CEO against all the relevant criteria can be an onerous task, so succession planning should be started early and with careful thought. Relevant criteria can be used when filling positions or evaluating performance. These criteria should be differentiated into specific and general categories. Those criteria considered specific should be further differentiated within the areas of exploration and exploitation. This makes differentiated assessments of applicants/job holders for direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership possible. Due to constant environmental changes and possible corresponding shifts in the demands placed on the job holder, assessment should be regularly carried out to identify development potential.

If a top executive does not fully meet all the criteria for direct ambidextrous leadership, then the leadership role and associated criteria should be prioritised over that of the management role, as this better serves the purposes of establishing/maintaining an ambidextrous organisation. This is because people with a predominantly managerial orientation will disproportionally tend towards the optimisation of existing resources, which carries the risk of short-term goals displacing longer-term ones. Amongst other things this is why – unless an ambidextrous top executive is available – organisations should appoint a CEO with long-term vision and a strategic outlook, along with other strengths suitable for a leadership role/CEO.

The extent of ambidextrous leadership must not be judged only by the practise of opening and closing leadership because the focus therein is solely on the leadership of third parties. This is insufficient as top executives must meet requirements in addition to the direct management of employees. For example, they are also responsible for organisation-wide vision and strategy development. Ambidextrous leadership ideas must also be more broadly integrated on a personal level to explore, exploit, align and adapt in all areas of leadership and management.

7. Limitations and future research recommendations

Although there are relationships between the different concepts listed here (exploration/exploitation and leader/manager role), it should be emphasised that they do not equate to each other. Furthermore, the differentiating features between direct and indirect ambidextrous leadership discussed in this paper should not be regarded as conclusive.

It might be asked what precise degree of flexibility a top executive leading ambidextrously but indirectly needs in comparison to a top executive who directly leads ambidextrously. Linked to this question is the question of whether flexibility is needed to alternate between exploration and exploitation but not for opening and closing leadership. Opening and closing leadership may be used to varying degrees by executives throughout all layers of the hierarchy depending on role specifics, whereas any organisation-wide shifts of focus implicit in switching between exploration and exploitation may not be delegable. The question of what efficient flexibility between vertical and shared leadership might look like could also be clarified.

Another question that needs to be answered is whether a top executive with moderate exploration and exploitation skills and high flexibility (categorised as Area IV – top executive for direct ambidextrous leadership) is better for an organisation than a top executive with strong leadership ability but fewer capabilities in exploitation and flexibility skills (who is classified as Area III – top executive for indirect ambidextrous leadership). Thus, depending on the particular needs of the organisation, some further differentiation is needed to choose between candidates with different strengths.

In addition, within the deductive approach, empirical studies can clarify how many organisations practise direct/indirect ambidextrous leadership and identify any variation among different industries and company sizes. Regarding indirect ambidextrous leadership, the question of how tasks are distributed, as well as which tasks are distributed, among the members of the TMT and lower hierarchical levels could also be addressed.

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