

Ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention among new-generation knowledge employees in China: Dual mediation via commitment to change and trait-relevant work tendencies

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ABSTRACT

Retaining new-generation knowledge employees is a strategic human capital challenge for firms operating under rapid technological change. Ambidextrous leadership, which flexibly combines transformational and transactional behaviors, may reduce turnover intention, yet its micro-level mechanisms remain insufficiently integrated in transitional economies. Drawing on commitment-to-change theory and trait activation logic, this study tests whether ambidextrous leadership lowers turnover intention directly and indirectly via (i) commitment to change (affective, continuance, and normative) and (ii) trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work indicated by Big Five trait measures. We surveyed 445 degree-holding employees (born in or after 1990) working in enterprises in Guangdong Province, China, and applied confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling with 5000-resample bootstrapped indirect effects. Ambidextrous leadership was associated with lower turnover intention, with significant indirect effects through stronger commitment to change and more constructive trait-relevant work tendencies. These findings extend ambidextrous leadership research beyond innovation outcomes to a core HRM outcome and highlight actionable leadership practices that combine vision and support with role clarity, monitoring, and contingent reinforcement to stabilize a mobile knowledge workforce in China.

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1. Introduction

Retaining highly skilled and mobility-oriented employees has become a strategic priority as firms confront rapid technological change and intensified competition. Workforce sustainability in this context depends on human capital stability, maintaining a reliable base of knowledge, employees whose expertise supports organizational learning continuity, service or product quality, and adaptive capacity. New-generation knowledge employees, typically younger, highly educated, and career-driven, prioritize meaningful work and rapid development but often exhibit lower organizational attachment and higher mobility, which amplifies recruitment, training, knowledge loss, and productivity disruption costs (Kuhn & Yu, 2021; Xueyun et al., 2023). Identifying leadership levers that curb turnover intention in this cohort is therefore central to talent retention and long-term organizational resilience.

Ambidextrous leadership (AL), defined as the purposive integration and flexible alternation of transformational and transactional behaviors, has been advanced as an effective approach for managing competing organizational demands (Rosing et al., 2011; Guo et al., 2020). Transformational behaviors (e.g., articulating vision, encouraging new ideas, individualized consideration) enhance meaning, psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation, whereas transactional behaviors (e.g., clarifying goals and expectations, monitoring, contingent rewards) provide discipline, predictability, and procedural fairness. Leaders who deploy both behavioral logics in a situationally appropriate manner may better match heterogeneous employee needs and shifting task contexts, particularly among knowledge employees who value autonomy and efficacy alongside clarity and fairness (Yin et al., 2022). Accordingly, AL should be consequential for retention outcomes in dynamic organizational settings.

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Despite increasing attention to ambidextrous leadership, two limitations constrain its contribution to the turnover literature. First, prior work has concentrated on innovation, voice, and performance outcomes, leaving turnover intention and retention-related outcomes comparatively underdeveloped, especially in contexts where talent mobility poses a material risk to human capital stability. Second, existing explanations are often theoretically compartmentalized, emphasizing either attitudinal mechanisms or individual differences in isolation. As a result, it remains unclear how the same leadership repertoire can simultaneously shape employees' change-related motivational attachment and their trait-relevant work tendencies, which jointly influence turnover intention.

To address these gaps, this study advances an integrated micro-level account in which ambidextrous leadership supports retention through two complementary mechanisms: commitment to change and trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work. Commitment to change reflects employees' affective, continuance, and normative motivations to support organizational change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Because transformational behaviors strengthen identification with a compelling future and transactional behaviors reduce uncertainty through role clarity and contingent reinforcement, AL should foster stronger commitment to change, thereby lowering withdrawal cognitions. In parallel, trait activation theory suggests that situational cues, such as leader behaviors, elicit trait-relevant tendencies in day-to-day work (Tett et al., 2021). Thus, AL may influence turnover intention by reinforcing constructive trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work (e.g., emotionally stable coping, conscientious follow-through, cooperative engagement), which are associated with lower turnover intention (Alayli, 2023).

Against this backdrop, we examine Chinese enterprises employing new-generation knowledge employees and test whether AL reduces turnover intention directly and indirectly via stronger commitment to change and more constructive trait-relevant work tendencies. This study makes three contributions. First, it extends ambidextrous leadership research beyond innovation-centric outcomes by establishing turnover intention as a consequential HRM outcome for managing mobile knowledge employees in China. Second, it provides a more integrated explanation by theorizing and testing dual micro-mechanisms, a motivational pathway via commitment to change and a dispositional pathway via trait activation, thereby addressing fragmentation in prior retention models. Third, it aligns theory and measurement by interpreting Big Five indicators as trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work under leadership cues rather than short-term trait change, offering a defensible operationalization of trait activation processes in cross-sectional field data.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Sustainable workforce retention depends on leadership practices that help employees remain motivated and adaptive under continuous organizational change. Ambidextrous leadership (AL) is particularly relevant because it integrates transformational behaviors that create meaning and support with transactional behaviors that provide structure, clarity, and contingent reinforcement (Guo et al., 2020; Ouyang et al., 2022). Building on this logic, the present study proposes that AL reduces turnover intention through two complementary micro-level mechanisms: (i) commitment to change as a motivational pathway, and (ii) personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work as a dispositional pathway consistent with trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021).

2.1. *The Impact of Ambidextrous Leadership on Turnover Intention*

Ambidextrous leadership refers to the purposeful combination and flexible alternation of transformational and transactional leader behaviors to manage competing organizational demands (Rosing, 2011). Transformational behaviors (e.g., articulating a compelling vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration) can enhance meaningfulness, psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation, whereas transactional behaviors (e.g., clarifying goals and role expectations, performance monitoring, contingent rewards) strengthen role clarity, predictability, and procedural fairness. Together, these behaviors address two well-established antecedents of turnover intention: reducing withdrawal cognitions by cultivating supportive climates and reducing ambiguity that otherwise increases uncertainty and exit intentions (Sobaih et al., 2022). Empirical research consistently indicates that constructive leadership behaviors are negatively associated with turnover intention, whereas destructive forms of supervision reliably increase turnover intention (Li & Chen, 2021; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023). For new-generation knowledge employees, typically born after 1990 and characterized by strong preferences for autonomy, fairness, and development, ambidextrous leadership may be especially salient because it combines empowerment and support with clear, predictable structures that reduce uncertainty without constraining initiative (Zacher & Rosing, 2015). Accordingly, this study proposes:

H₁: *Ambidextrous leadership negatively affects turnover intention among new-generation knowledge employees.*

2.2. *Commitment to Change as a Mediator*

Commitment to change is defined as employees' psychological attachment to a specific organizational change initiative and is commonly conceptualized as comprising three components: affective (desire-based), continuance (cost-based), and normative (obligation-based) commitment to change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Affective commitment to change reflects employees' willing endorsement of change-related benefits, whereas continuance commitment reflects perceived costs of not

supporting the change, and normative commitment reflects felt obligation to support the change (Faisaluddin et al., 2024). Because turnover intention is fundamentally an evaluative judgment about staying versus leaving, change-specific commitment is particularly relevant in contexts where employees' retention decisions are shaped by how they appraise and engage with organizational transformation.

Leadership is a consistent antecedent of stronger commitment to change. Transformational leadership has been shown to foster commitment to change and pro-change responses, and commitment to change can transmit leadership effects to desirable outcomes such as innovative behavior (Jun & Lee, 2023). Ambidextrous leadership extends this logic by combining transformational cues that build identification with change goals and transactional cues that reduce uncertainty through goal clarity, monitoring, and contingent reinforcement. Evidence suggests that such coordinated leadership behaviors can strengthen employees' overall commitment and related positive behaviors by enhancing perceived support and predictability during change (Tao et al., 2025).

Stronger commitment is, in turn, associated with lower turnover intention. Contemporary evidence indicates that affective commitment is negatively related to turnover intention and that commitment can serve as a psychological pathway through which workplace conditions, including leadership, shape employees' intention to stay (Moreira et al., 2024). Therefore, ambidextrous leadership is expected to reduce turnover intention partly by strengthening employees' commitment to change. Thus, this study proposes:

- H₂:** *Commitment to change mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{2a}: *Affective commitment to change mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{2b}: *Continuance commitment to change mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{2c}: *Normative commitment to change mediates the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*

2.3. Personality Trait-Relevant Tendencies Expressed at Work as a Mediator

The Five-Factor Model (FFM) identifies five broad personality trait domains, emotional stability (low neuroticism), extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, that meaningfully predict work attitudes and behavioral tendencies, including turnover-related cognitions (Roberts & Yoon, 2022). Recent empirical work continues to show associations between Big Five profiles and turnover intention (e.g., higher emotional stability and conscientiousness are linked to lower turnover intention), underscoring the relevance of personality to retention (Mascareño et al., 2021). However, in organizational settings, personality influences retention-relevant outcomes primarily through the extent to which situational cues elicit trait-relevant tendencies in daily work. Trait activation theory posits that trait-consistent behavior is expressed when the environment provides cues that "activate" trait-relevant tendencies (Tett et al., 2021). Ambidextrous leadership is well-positioned to generate such cues because it integrates "opening" behaviors that encourage exploration with "closing" behaviors that provide structure, monitoring, and reinforcement (Mascareño et al., 2021; Klonek et al., 2023). Opening behaviors may facilitate the expression of openness and extraversion by encouraging idea exploration, voice, and proactive engagement, whereas closing behaviors may facilitate conscientious and agreeable expression by reinforcing follow-through, coordination, and cooperative compliance. Additionally, the combination of inspiration and structure may reduce ambiguity and dampen negative affective reactions under uncertainty, thereby supporting emotionally stable expression. Evidence from knowledge-intensive contexts also suggests that leadership can shape retention-related cognitions through mechanisms such as improved fit and adaptive work experiences (Xiong et al., 2023), consistent with a trait activation account. Accordingly, ambidextrous leadership is expected to reduce turnover intention by fostering constructive personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work that support adaptive coping, positive social interaction, and goal-directed persistence, these patterns associated with lower withdrawal cognitions (Alayli, 2023). Therefore, this study proposes:

- H₃:** *Personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work mediate the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{3a}: *Emotional stability trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work mediate the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{3b}: *Extraversion trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work mediate the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{3c}: *Openness to experience trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work mediate the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{3d}: *Agreeableness trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work mediate the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*
H_{3e}: *Conscientiousness trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work mediate the relationship between ambidextrous leadership and turnover intention.*

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The target population comprised new-generation knowledge employees born in or after 1990 who held at least a bachelor's degree and were employed in enterprises in Guangdong Province, China. This population represents a large and highly mobile segment of the Chinese labor force characterized by comparatively high education, strong career-development orientation, and substantial technology proficiency. Guangdong Province was selected because of its economic prominence and rapid industrial transformation, which provides an appropriate context for examining retention-related outcomes among knowledge employees in dynamic organizational environments.

The minimum sample size was estimated using Yamane's (1973) formula with a 95% confidence level and a $\pm 5\%$ margin of error, yielding an approximate target of 400 respondents. Data were collected via an online survey. A total of 479 responses were obtained. To ensure data quality, incomplete questionnaires, patterned responses (e.g., straight-lining), and logically inconsistent answers were excluded. The final analytic sample comprised 445 valid responses.

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study purpose, provided informed consent prior to participation, and were assured that participation was voluntary and that responses would remain anonymous and confidential.

3.2. Questionnaire Development and Measures

The questionnaire was developed based on established instruments and adapted to the Chinese context. All items were measured using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

First, ambidextrous leadership (AL) was measured using a combined scale integrating transformational and transactional leadership behaviors, following the framework proposed by Rosing et al. (2011) and further refined by Han et al. (2016). The scale captures transformational behaviors (e.g., inspirational motivation, individualized consideration) and transactional behaviors (e.g., contingent rewards, structured supervision).

Second, commitment to change (CC) was assessed using the scale developed by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), capturing affective, continuance, and normative commitment to change.

Third, personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work (PE) was assessed using the Big Five Inventory-2 extra-short form (BFI-2-XS) developed by Soto and John (2017), measuring emotional stability, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Consistent with trait activation logic, the BFI-2-XS self-reports were interpreted as indicators of trait-relevant tendencies reported in a work context rather than evidence of short-term changes in underlying traits.

Last, turnover intention (TI) was measured using the widely used 4-item scale developed by Farh et al. (1998). Prior to the formal survey, a pilot test with 30 participants from different organizational levels (senior managers, middle managers, and frontline employees) was conducted to refine item wording, improve clarity, and ensure cultural appropriateness. Expert reviews were also conducted to confirm the alignment between measurement items and the intended constructs.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0 and Mplus 7.0. First, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize respondent characteristics. Second, internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), with values above 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Third, construct validity was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Convergent validity was supported when standardized factor loadings were acceptable (≥ 0.60) and average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.50. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, whereby the square root of AVE for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Fourth, hierarchical measurement structures were examined using second-order CFA for commitment to change and personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work. The appropriateness of the second-order specification was evaluated using the target coefficient approach (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985).

Fifth, common method variance (CMV) was assessed using a single-factor CFA test by constraining all measurement items to load onto one latent factor and comparing model fit with that of the hypothesized multi-factor measurement model.

Substantially poorer fit of the single-factor model was interpreted as indicating that CMV was unlikely to be a serious concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Finally, hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Mediation effects were examined using bootstrapping with 5000 resamples to estimate indirect effects and corresponding confidence intervals. All SEM results are reported using STDYX standardized estimates.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The final dataset comprised 445 valid responses. Table 1 presents respondents' demographic characteristics, including year of birth, gender, marital status, academic degree, professional title, and position level. The sample was predominantly female (70.56%) and unmarried (63.37%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (91.24%), while 8.76% held a master's degree. Regarding professional status, 55.28% reported no professional title; among those with titles, junior-level titles were most common (28.76%). In terms of position level, the majority were in early-career roles (entry-level staff: 44.49%; junior staff: 28.54%), consistent with the study's focus on new-generation knowledge employees.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of the sample (N = 445).

Demographic variable	Category	n	Percentage (%)
Year of birth	1990-1992	152	34.15
	1993-1995	168	37.75
	1996-1998	103	23.15
	1999 and later	22	4.95
Gender	Male	131	29.44
	Female	314	70.56
Marital status	Married	163	36.63
	Unmarried	282	63.37
Academic degree	Bachelor's	406	91.24
	Master's	39	8.76
	Doctoral	0	0.00
Professional title	Junior title	128	28.76
	Intermediate title	71	15.96
	Associate senior title	0	0.00
	Senior title	0	0.00
	No professional title	246	55.28
Position level	Staff (Entry-level)	198	44.49
	Staff (Junior)	127	28.54
	Staff (Mid-level)	62	13.93
	Staff (Senior)	14	3.15
	Technical staff (Technician)	44	9.89
	Technical staff (Senior technician)	0	0.00

4.2. Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity were assessed prior to hypothesis testing. As shown in Table 2, internal consistency was satisfactory across constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80 and composite reliability (CR) ranging from 0.80 to 0.96. Convergent validity was supported, as AVE values exceeded 0.50 and standardized factor loadings met acceptable thresholds (Table 2).

Table 2

Reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	k	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
AL	12	0.94	0.56	0.86
CC	20	0.96	0.57	0.87
PE	15	0.94	0.53	0.85
TI	4	0.80	0.50	0.83

Note: k = number of items; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Standardized factor loadings were acceptable (≥ 0.60). Second-order CFA target coefficients: CC = 0.98; PE = 0.96.

Discriminant validity was supported using the Fornell-Larcker criterion; the square roots of AVEs exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations (Table 3).

The hypothesized measurement model demonstrated good fit ($\chi^2 = 2369.55$, $df = 1094$, $\chi^2/df = 2.16$, $CFI = 0.95$, $TLI = 0.93$, $RMSEA = 0.05$, $SRMR = 0.04$) (Table 4). Second-order CFA further supported the hierarchical structures of commitment to change and personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work, with target coefficients of 0.98 and 0.96, respectively (Table 2), indicating that the second-order specifications were appropriate. The detailed indices are reported in Tables 2–4.

Table 3

Correlations and square roots of AVE (Fornell–Larcker criterion)

Construct	AL	CC	PE	TI
AL	0.75			
CC	0.49	0.75		
PE	0.45	0.67	0.73	
TI	-0.58	-0.65	-0.63	0.71

Note: Diagonal elements (bold) are the square roots of AVE. Off-diagonal elements are inter-construct correlations.

Table 4

Measurement model fit indices.

χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
2369.55	1094	2.16	0.95	0.93	0.05	0.04

4.3. Common Method Variance Assessment

Potential common method variance (CMV) was examined using a single-factor CFA test. The single-factor model showed poor fit ($\chi^2 = 6983.09$, $df = 1105$, $CFI = 0.61$, $RMSEA = 0.11$), which was substantially worse than the hypothesized multi-factor measurement model ($\chi^2 = 2369.55$, $df = 1094$, $CFI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.05$). This comparison suggests that CMV is unlikely to be a serious concern in the present study.

4.4. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Fig. 1 and Table 5 report the standardized (STDYX) path estimates. Ambidextrous leadership was negatively associated with turnover intention ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Ambidextrous leadership was positively associated with commitment to change ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$). In turn, both commitment to change ($\beta = -0.53$, $p < 0.001$) and personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$) were negatively associated with turnover intention. The structural model explained substantial variance in turnover intention ($R^2 = 0.41$), commitment to change ($R^2 = 0.39$), and personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work ($R^2 = 0.43$) (Table 5).

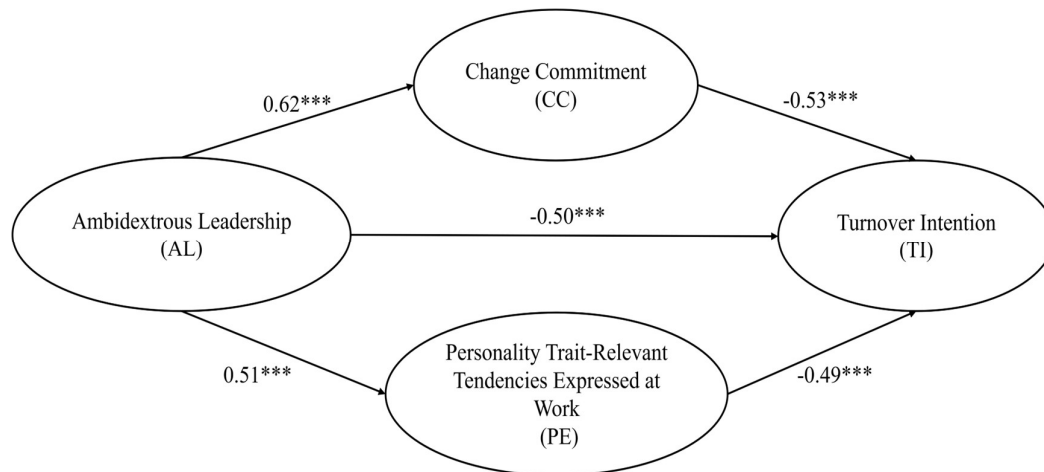


Fig. 1. Structural equation model with standardized (STDYX) estimates. *** $p < 0.001$. Source: Created by the authors.

Table 5

Structural path estimates (STDYX standardized).

DV	IV	β	SE	z	p-value	R^2
TI	AL	-0.50	0.05	-10.78	***	0.41
TI	CC	-0.53	0.04	-14.36	***	
TI	PE	-0.49	0.04	-13.79	***	
CC	AL	0.62	0.06	11.03	***	0.39
PE	AL	0.51	0.04	13.56	***	0.43

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. β values are STDYX standardized coefficients. AL = ambidextrous leadership; CC = commitment to change; PE = personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work; TI = turnover intention. SE = standard error.

Mediation effects were examined using bootstrapping with 5000 resamples (Table 6). The indirect effect of ambidextrous leadership on turnover intention via commitment to change was significant (indirect $\beta = -0.33$, bias-corrected 95% CI [-0.67, -0.30]), supporting H2. The indirect effect via personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work was also significant (indirect $\beta = -0.25$, bias-corrected 95% CI [-0.45, -0.22]), supporting H3. In both cases, the confidence intervals excluded zero, indicating robust mediation.

Table 6

Bootstrapped indirect effects (STDXY standardized; 5,000 resamples).

Indirect path	Indirect effect	SE	95% CI (bias-corrected)	
			Lower	Upper
AL → CC → TI	-0.33	0.05	-0.67	-0.30
AL → PE → TI	-0.25	0.04	-0.45	-0.22

Note: Indirect effects are statistically significant when the confidence interval does not include zero.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined whether ambidextrous leadership (AL)—the coordinated and flexible deployment of transformational and transactional behaviors—supports sustainable workforce retention by reducing turnover intention among new-generation knowledge employees in China. The results provide consistent evidence that AL is associated with lower turnover intention both directly and indirectly through two complementary mechanisms: employees' commitment to change and personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work. Given that turnover intention is widely recognized as a proximal antecedent of actual turnover, reducing such cognitions is central to sustainable workforce retention strategies (Hom et al., 2017).

First, AL exhibited a substantial negative association with turnover intention ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that leaders who simultaneously provide inspiration and individualized support while maintaining role clarity, monitoring, and contingent reinforcement can reduce employees' exit cognitions. This aligns with ambidextrous leadership theory, which argues that combining "opening" and "closing" leader behaviors enables organizations to balance exploration and execution demands (Guo et al., 2020; Klonek et al., 2023).

Second, the findings support a coherent motivational pathway through commitment to change. AL was positively related to commitment to change ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$), and commitment to change was negatively related to turnover intention ($\beta = -0.53$, $p < 0.001$). Bootstrapping further confirmed a significant indirect effect via commitment to change (indirect $\beta = -0.33$; bias-corrected 95% CI [-0.67, -0.30]). These results are consistent with the three-component conceptualization of commitment to change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002) and converge with broader meta-analytic evidence that affective, continuance, and normative commitment are systematically associated with lower withdrawal cognitions and turnover-relevant outcomes (Meyer et al., 2002). In transitional and change-intensive environments, AL likely reduces uncertainty while strengthening employees' identification with change goals, thereby lowering withdrawal cognitions. Evidence that leader behaviors enhance commitment through trust, clarity, and exchange quality provides further support for this interpretation (Wu et al., 2020; Frediani et al., 2025).

Third, the results also support a dispositional pathway grounded in trait activation logic. AL was positively related to personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn were negatively associated with turnover intention ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect through this mechanism was significant (indirect $\beta = -0.25$; bias-corrected 95% CI [-0.45, -0.22]). This pattern is consistent with the foundational trait activation model, which posits that situational cues embedded in the work environment elicit trait-relevant behavioral tendencies (Tett & Burnett, 2003), and with subsequent interactionist evidence that the predictive relevance of Big Five traits depends on trait-activating cues and situation strength (Judge & Zapata, 2015). In particular, by integrating opening behaviors (e.g., encouraging exploration and voice) and closing behaviors (e.g., reinforcing follow-through and coordination), AL may elicit more constructive trait-relevant tendencies (e.g., emotionally stable coping, conscientious follow-through, agreeable cooperation), which are associated with lower turnover intention (Klonek et al., 2023). Related evidence in knowledge-intensive settings that leadership influences turnover intention through adaptive work experiences and fit perceptions is also consistent with this interpretation (Xiong et al., 2023).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it extends ambidextrous leadership research beyond innovation and performance outcomes by positioning AL as a leadership capability relevant to sustainable workforce retention among a highly mobile, post-1990s knowledge workforce in China. Second, it advances a more integrated explanatory account by demonstrating two complementary micro-level mechanisms, (i) a motivational pathway via commitment to change and (ii) a dispositional pathway via trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work, thereby addressing concerns that multi-mediator models can appear fragmented when not theoretically integrated. Third, by aligning the personality mechanism with trait activation logic, the study clarifies how a trait-based measure can meaningfully inform retention processes without implying short-term changes in underlying personality structure (Tett et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings indicate that ambidextrous leadership is associated with lower turnover intention among new-generation knowledge employees in China and that this relationship operates through both stronger commitment to change and more constructive trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work. In dynamic organizational contexts, leaders who can combine inspirational, empowering behaviors with clear expectations and contingent reinforcement may help sustain a stable, engaged, and adaptable knowledge workforce, an outcome central to organizational resilience.

6. Implications

On the theoretical level, this study contributes to the ambidextrous leadership (AL) literature by extending AL's relevance from innovation-oriented outcomes to a core sustainability-related personnel outcome—turnover intention—among new-generation knowledge employees in China. The findings clarify why AL matters for retention by demonstrating two complementary micro-level mechanisms. First, AL strengthens employees' commitment to change, which in turn reduces turnover intention. Second, AL is associated with more constructive personality trait-relevant tendencies expressed at work, consistent with trait activation logic, which also reduces turnover intention. By integrating a motivational pathway (commitment to change) with a dispositional pathway (trait-relevant tendencies at work), the study provides a more coherent explanatory framework than models that treat multiple mediators as disconnected mechanisms (Mascareño et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2023).

In addition, the study addresses a common conceptual concern in leadership–personality research by framing the personality mechanism as contextualized trait-relevant tendencies rather than implying rapid change in underlying trait structure. This positioning aligns with evidence that personality can exhibit modest, context-dependent variability in expressed tendencies over time (Hudson et al., 2019), while remaining compatible with trait-based measurement.

At the practical level, the results suggest several actionable strategies for organizations seeking sustainable workforce retention.

Firstly, develop ambidextrous leadership capability. Organizations should invest in leadership development that trains managers to shift appropriately between “opening” behaviors (vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized support) and “closing” behaviors (goal clarity, monitoring, contingent reinforcement). Developing this behavioral repertoire can support employee adaptability and performance in dynamic contexts and may contribute to stronger retention-relevant attitudes (Slåtten et al., 2023).

Secondly, build commitment to change through structured change management practices. Managers should systematically strengthen employees' affective, continuance, and normative commitment to change by communicating clear rationales, encouraging participation, and maintaining consistent, transparent communication during transitions. Such practices can increase perceived meaning and predictability, which are central conditions for sustaining commitment and reducing turnover intention (Faisaluddin et al., 2024).

Thirdly, use talent systems that support fit and sustained engagement. Organizations can improve retention by aligning selection, placement, and development with role requirements and by using evidence-based assessment and capability-building practices. For example, conscientiousness-related tendencies are consistently linked to sustained performance and follow-through at work (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). Importantly, day-to-day leadership can reinforce retention-relevant tendencies (e.g., diligence, cooperation, constructive coping) by providing trait-relevant cues and reinforcement, without assuming wholesale trait change.

Last, strengthen transparency and innovation-supportive routines. Transparent communication and innovation-supportive routines can reinforce the effects of leadership behaviors on employee confidence and engagement, thereby indirectly supporting retention-related outcomes (Zumitzavan et al., 2025).

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and provide directions for future research.

First, causal inference is limited by the cross-sectional design. Although the hypothesized model is theory-driven, cross-sectional data cannot establish temporal precedence. Future studies should adopt longitudinal, multi-wave, or experimental designs to test causal mechanisms and to examine whether leadership effects on commitment to change and trait-relevant tendencies unfold over time.

Second, the study relies on single-source self-report data. While CMV was assessed using a single-factor CFA comparison, this approach is not the strongest available test. Future research should apply more robust procedural and statistical remedies, such as multi-source designs (e.g., supervisor-rated leadership, objective or administrative turnover outcomes), time

separation of measures, or latent method factor approaches, consistent with recommended practices in the method-bias literature (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Third, generalizability is constrained by the sampling context. The sample was drawn from enterprises in Guangdong Province and focused on degree-holding employees born in or after 1990. Replication across regions, industries, and generational cohorts would clarify the boundary conditions of the model and assess whether the mechanisms operate similarly in different labor-market and cultural contexts.

Finally, additional mediators and moderators should be examined. Future studies could extend the model by testing alternative mechanisms (e.g., perceived organizational support, job satisfaction, psychological safety) and boundary conditions (e.g., change intensity, job insecurity, HR practices) to improve explanatory precision and address when AL is most effective for retention.

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