

Psychological Empowerment, Knowledge Sharing, Coworker Support and Platform Leadership Effecting Employee Innovative Behavior High-Tech Manufacturing in China

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Abstract

This study, grounded in Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) framework, investigates the emerging leadership paradigm of platform leadership within the context of China. The research focuses on: (1) examining the effect of platform leadership on employees’ innovative behavior; (2) exploring the mediating roles of organizational learning, knowledge sharing, psychological empowerment, and coworker support in the relationship between platform leadership and employees’ innovative behavior; and (3) analyzing the overall relationship between platform leadership and employee innovation. A mixed–methods approach was employed, following a sequential explanatory design. The quantitative phase involved the analysis of questionnaire data from 518 employees working in high–tech industries in Chongqing, including the manufacturing, software, and information services sectors, as well as internet companies. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and SmartPLS software. For the qualitative phase, semi–structured interviews were conducted with employees from 24 enterprises to further explore the structural equation model.

The research findings indicate that: (1) platform leadership has a positive and significant impact on organizational learning, knowledge sharing, coworker support, and psychological empowerment; and that organizational learning, knowledge sharing, and psychological empowerment significantly influence employee innovative behavior. (2) Platform leadership affects employee innovative behavior indirectly through these mediators, with organizational learning showing the strongest mediating effect. (3) The

mediating role of coworker support and the underlying mechanisms linking platform leadership to innovative behavior warrant further investigation and empirical validation.

Keywords: Platform Leadership; Innovative Behavior; Organizational Learning; Knowledge Sharing; Psychological Empowerment

Introduction

In the context of China's rapidly developing digital economy, traditional management models are being challenged by the rise of platform-based organizational structures. This transformation has given rise to platform leadership a leadership paradigm emphasizing equality, decentralization, and mutual growth between leaders and subordinates (Xin & Kong, 2020; Xie, 2022). As traditional hierarchical structures struggle to adapt to the demands of speed and innovation, new leadership frameworks are needed to support employee creativity and innovative behavior, especially in high-tech sectors (Ji et al., 2014).

The concept of platform leadership, introduced by Hao Xuguang in 2014, focuses on empowering employees by creating shared platforms that foster collaboration, growth, and self-actualization (Hao, 2016a). This leadership style aligns with the growing employee desire for self-development, job autonomy, and meaningful work, especially in a post-pandemic environment where digitalization redefines the employer-employee relationship (Chen et al., 2020; Wu, 2022).

Despite its relevance, empirical research on platform leadership remains limited, particularly regarding its impact on employee innovative behavior. Studies have primarily been conceptual, with little integration of mediating variables such as organizational learning, knowledge sharing, psychological empowerment, and coworker support (Xu, 2022; Hao et al., 2021). This study fills these theoretical gaps by employing a multi-theory framework that includes Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the AMO (Ability-Motivation-Opportunity) model to explore the mechanisms through which platform leadership influences innovation among employees (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Bandura & Walters, 1977; Appelbaum et al., 2000).

In the era of the digital economy, enterprises must continually transform to maintain competitiveness and ensure sustainable, high-quality development. However, traditional leadership

models are increasingly inadequate in meeting the evolving expectations of employees, particularly their desire for personal growth, value co-creation, and self-actualization (Xin et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). Many employees no longer see themselves merely as labor contributors but as partners seeking meaningful engagement with the organization. This shift necessitates leadership that goes beyond command-control to a more collaborative and empowering model.

Platform leadership, introduced by Hao (2016a), addresses these needs by promoting equality, shared development, and resource co-creation between leaders and employees. Unlike traditional leadership styles, platform leadership encourages two-way interaction, aiming to stimulate mutual growth and innovation (Xu, 2022). However, empirical studies on platform leadership remain scarce, particularly those exploring its influence on employee innovative behavior and the mechanisms through which this influence operates.

Although existing research has highlighted the positive impact of other leadership types (e.g., transformational, authentic, inclusive) on innovation (Fan et al., 2021; Guan & Wang, 2016), the unique role of platform leadership and its interaction with factors such as organizational learning, knowledge sharing, coworker support, and psychological empowerment has yet to be thoroughly examined. Furthermore, the theoretical foundations used in previous studies are often narrow and lack a comprehensive, multi-theory perspective (Xu, 2022).

This study addresses these gaps by proposing a holistic model rooted in Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the AMO framework to investigate the internal mechanisms through which platform leadership affects employee innovation in high-tech Chinese enterprises.

Research Objective

The overall aim of this study is to explore platform leadership's consequences for employee's innovative behavior. However, in order to answer the core questions, this study has the following specific objectives.

1. To explore the effect of platform leadership on employee's innovative behavior.
2. To explore the mediating role of organization learning, knowledge sharing, Psychological empower and coworker support those influence the platform leadership effect on employee's innovative behavior.

3. To analyze the relationship between platform leaders and employee innovative behavior.

Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis No. Contents of Hypothesis

H1	Platform leaders have a positive and significant influence on employee innovative behavior
H2	Platform leaders have a significant positive impact on organization learning
H3	Platform leaders have a significant positive impact on Knowledge sharing
H4	Platform leaders have a significant positive impact on the coworker support
H5	Platform leaders have a significant positive impact on the employee's psychological empower
H6	Organization learning have a significant positive impact on employee innovative behavior
H7	knowledge sharing have a significant positive impact on employee innovative behavior
H8	Coworker support have a significant positive impact on employee innovative behavior
H9	Psychological empower have a significant positive impact on employee innovative behavior
H10	Organization learning mediate the relationship between Platform leaders and employee innovative behavior.(mediator)
H11	Knowledge sharing mediate the relationship between Platform leaders and employee innovative behavior.(mediator)
H12	Coworker support mediate the relationship between Platform leaders and employee innovative behavior.(mediator)
H13	Psychological empower mediate the relationship between Platform leaders and employee innovative behavior.(mediator)

1. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Exchange Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) Framework. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional lens to explore how platform leadership influences employee innovative behavior through mediating mechanisms.

1.1 Social Exchange Theory (SET) Social Exchange Theory suggests that individuals engage in relationships based on reciprocal exchanges of resources, such as support, trust, and recognition (Blau, 1964). In organizational contexts, this theory posits that when employees perceive support and fairness from their leaders—such as through platform leadership—they reciprocate through enhanced work outcomes, including innovative behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Platform leadership emphasizes mutual benefit and shared growth, thus fostering high-quality leader–member exchanges that stimulate innovation-related behaviors.

1.2 Social Learning Theory (SLT) Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory explains that individuals acquire new behaviors by observing and imitating role models in social settings. In the workplace, leaders who demonstrate visionary, inclusive, and empowering behaviors serve as referent models for employees. Platform leaders—by virtue of their open communication, shared decision-making, and developmental focus—provide both behavioral cues and psychological safety that encourage vicarious learning and innovative behavior (Gist, 1987).

1.3 Ability–Motivation–Opportunity (AMO) Framework The AMO framework proposes that employee performance is a function of their ability, motivation, and the opportunity provided by the organization (Appelbaum et al., 2000). This study aligns the mediating variables as follows:

- Psychological Empowerment represents the ability dimension.

- Knowledge Sharing reflects intrinsic motivation.
- Organizational Learning and Coworker Support represent contextual opportunities that foster innovation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Platform Leadership and Innovation Platform leadership is a form of emergent leadership characterized by egalitarianism, shared resources, and co-creation of value (Hao, 2016a). Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership, platform leaders build collaborative ecosystems that encourage employee autonomy and innovation. Prior studies suggest that platform leadership promotes trust, removes bureaucratic barriers, and enhances idea flow (Xu, 2022; Xin & Kong, 2020). However, the empirical validation of its influence on innovation especially through mediators remains limited.

2.2 Psychological Empowerment Psychological empowerment refers to employees' perception of meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact at work (Spreitzer, 1995). Empowered employees are more likely to take initiative, embrace risk, and generate creative solutions. Transformational and servant leadership styles have been associated with higher psychological empowerment (Chen et al., 2006), but studies focusing on empowerment as a mediator in the platform leadership–innovation relationship are still emerging (Shi & Yang, 2015). The AMO model positions psychological empowerment as a core internal capability that drives innovation.

2.3 Knowledge Sharing Knowledge sharing is the intentional act of exchanging task-relevant ideas, information, and expertise among employees (Bock et al., 2005). In platform-driven environments, knowledge sharing becomes a vital motivational process whereby employees contribute to collective innovation. Social Learning Theory posits that sharing is not only strategic but mimetic driven by observed behaviors and organizational cues (Liu, 2020). Knowledge sharing has been linked to enhanced innovative behavior (Ye,

2021), yet the dual dimensions of sharing intention and sharing ability have rarely been jointly explored in leadership models.

2.4 Organizational Learning Organizational learning refers to the ongoing process through which organizations acquire, interpret, and retain knowledge for performance improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Wei, 2020). Learning cultures that encourage feedback, experimentation, and reflection directly foster innovation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Platform leadership supports organizational learning by flattening hierarchies and creating space for collaborative knowledge generation. Recent studies (He, 2020; Yu et al., 2009) highlight its role as both an innovation driver and a mediator between leadership and behavior outcomes.

2.5 Coworker Support Coworker support encompasses emotional and instrumental assistance provided by colleagues (Liang & Fang, 2022). A culture of peer support enhances idea validation, reduces uncertainty, and encourages experimentation key ingredients for innovation. Social Exchange Theory views coworker support as a reciprocal relationship, often shaped by leadership behaviors (Peng et al., 2021). While previous studies have explored it as a moderator, this study conceptualizes coworker support as a mediating pathway in the leadership–innovation link.

2.6 Integrated Mediating Effects Emerging literature suggests that platform leadership alone may not directly result in innovative behavior; instead, it activates internal and contextual mechanisms. Hao et al. (2021) argue that platform leaders influence innovation by shaping psychological states, social systems, and learning norms. This study builds on that insight by proposing a multi-mediation model, where psychological empowerment, knowledge sharing, coworker support, and organizational learning function as parallel mediators. These mediators align with the AMO framework and offer a robust explanation of how leadership influences innovation through human resource systems and social dynamics (Zhang & Kang, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

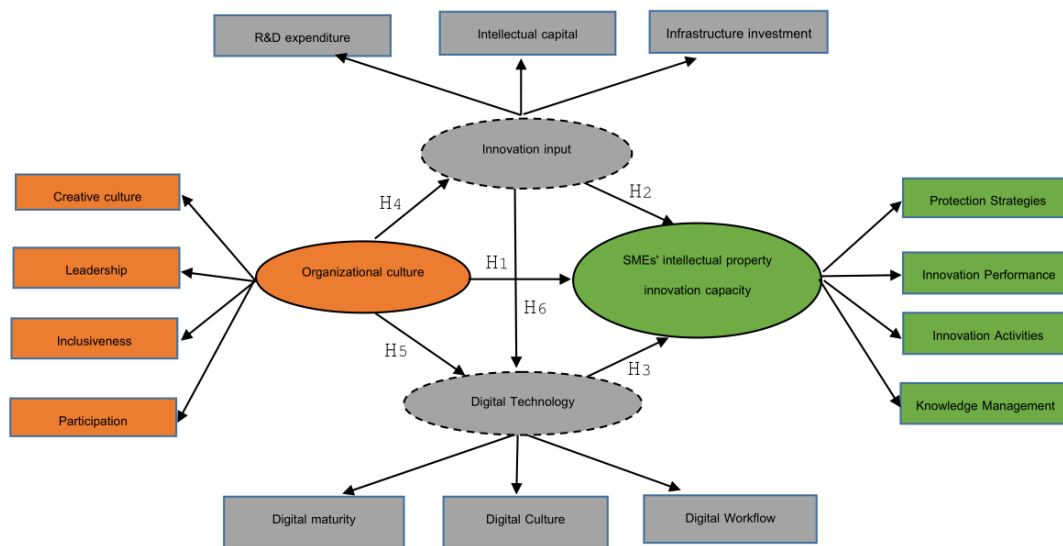


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design to investigate how platform leadership influences employee innovative behavior in high-tech manufacturing industries in China. The research integrates both quantitative and qualitative phases to strengthen the validity of findings and uncover deeper insights into mediating mechanisms.

Research Paradigm

The study is grounded in a pragmatic research paradigm, which emphasizes methodological flexibility and the use of multiple data sources to explore complex organizational phenomena. Pragmatism supports the integration of both positivist (quantitative) and interpretivist (qualitative) perspectives.

Research Design

A sequential explanatory design was employed in two distinct stages:

Phase 1 – Quantitative Study: Structured questionnaires were distributed to a large sample to test hypothesized relationships using statistical analysis.

Phase 2 – Qualitative Study: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to further explore and explain the quantitative results.

This design enables triangulation and provides both breadth and depth in analyzing the influence of platform leadership.

Quantitative Phase

Sample and Data Collection

Population: Employees from high-tech industries (e.g., manufacturing, software, internet services) in Chongqing, China.

Sampling Method: Stratified random sampling.

Sample Size: Pilot Study: 68 participants,

Formal Survey: 518 valid responses

Data Collection Period: May–July 2023

Tools Used: Online and paper-based questionnaires

Measurement Scales

Validated scales from existing literature were adapted to the Chinese context through translation–back translation. Constructs were measured using a 5–point Likert scale, including:

Platform Leadership: 6 dimensions, 25 items (Hao, 2016a; Zhao, 2018)

Employee Innovative Behavior: 2 dimensions, 8 items (Scott & Bruce, 1994)

Organizational Learning: 3 dimensions, 12 items (Wei, 2020)

Knowledge Sharing: 2 dimensions, 10 items (Ye, 2021)

Psychological Empowerment: 4 dimensions, 12 items (Spreitzer, 1995)

Coworker Support: 2 dimensions, 12 items (Liang & Fang, 2022)

Data Analysis Techniques

Software: SPSS 26 and SmartPLS 4

Analysis Performed:

Descriptive statistics

Reliability and validity tests (Cronbach's Alpha, AVE, Composite Reliability)

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Mediation testing (bootstrapping method)

Multicollinearity and Common Method Bias testing

Qualitative Phase

Participants 24 employees from 12 firms in the same region and industries were selected using purposeful sampling.

Interview Process

Instrument: Semi-structured interview guide aligned with key constructs

Duration: 45–60 minutes per interview

Recording and Transcription: All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis

Data Analysis

Techniques: Content analysis, Word frequency analysis, Sentiment analysis, Semantic network mapping

Software Used: NVivo and Python-based NLP tools

Qualitative findings were used to confirm, explain, and extend the statistical results from the quantitative phase.

Ethical Considerations

- Participation was voluntary and anonymous.
- Informed consent was obtained.
- Data confidentiality and integrity were maintained throughout the research process.

Research Results

This mixed-method research examined the influence of Platform Leadership (PL) on Employee Innovative Behavior (EIB) in high-tech manufacturing firms in Chongqing, China, with special attention to four mediators:

1. Organizational Learning (OL)
2. Knowledge Sharing (KS)
3. Psychological Empowerment (PE)
4. Coworker Support (CS)

Quantitative Results (PLS–SEM Analysis)

Table 1 Direct Effects of Platform Leadership

Path	Beta Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
PL $\rightarrow$ OL	0.661	$p < 0.001$	Strong positive influence
PL $\rightarrow$ KS	0.527	$p < 0.001$	Moderate to strong influence
PL $\rightarrow$ PE	0.478	$p < 0.001$	Significant influence
PL $\rightarrow$ CS	0.494	$p < 0.001$	Moderate positive effect

Interpretation: Platform leaders empower employees, foster learning, and encourage collaborative behaviors.

Table 2 Direct Effects on Employee Innovative Behavior (EIB)

Path	Beta Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
OL $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.513	$p < 0.001$	Strongest predictor of innovation
KS $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.412	$p < 0.001$	Moderate influence
PE $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.446	$p < 0.001$	Significant psychological driver
CS $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.328	$p < 0.001$	Smallest but still significant

Interpretation: Employees are more innovative when they are empowered, have access to knowledge, and feel supported by coworkers.

Table 3 Indirect Effects (Mediation via Bootstrapping)

Mediation Path	β (Indirect Effect)	p-value	Strength
PL $\rightarrow$ OL $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.339	$p < 0.001$	Strongest indirect path
PL $\rightarrow$ KS $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.217	$p < 0.001$	Moderate
PL $\rightarrow$ PE $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.187	$p < 0.001$	Moderate
PL $\rightarrow$ CS $\rightarrow$ EIB	0.162	$p < 0.001$	Weakest path, but significant

Interpretation: Organizational learning is the most powerful conduit through which platform leadership boosts innovation.

Table 4 Model Validity and Predictive Power

Model Metric	Value	Interpretation
R ² (EIB)	0.652	65.2% of variance in EIB explained by the model
Q ²	0.489	High predictive relevance
f ² (Effect Sizes)	Medium to large	Varies by path but mostly above 0.15
PLS–Predict (RMSE/Q ² Predict)	Acceptable	Indicates strong predictive power

Table 5 Measurement Model Validity

Test	Result	Interpretation
Cronbach’s Alpha	> 0.70	Internal consistency confirmed
Composite Reliability (CR)	> 0.70	Strong reliability
Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	> 0.50	Good convergent validity
HTMT (Heterotrait–Monotrait)	< 0.85	Discriminant validity confirmed

Qualitative Results

Sample

- 24 employees from 24 high-tech manufacturing firms in Chongqing, China.
- Participants held various roles (engineers, project leaders, team supervisors, R&D staff), ensuring diversity of viewpoints.

Thematic Findings from In-Depth Interviews

Using a grounded theory approach, qualitative data was analyzed to extract recurring themes and patterns. The following are the dominant themes:

Theme	Explanation	Supporting Quotes
Trust in Leadership	Employees frequently mentioned that they felt safe and respected under platform-style leaders. This sense of psychological safety allowed them to share ideas freely.	“My manager never blames us for failed experiments. He encourages us to try.”

Theme	Explanation	Supporting Quotes
Shared Vision & Empowerment	Workers appreciated being included in decision-making and goal-setting, feeling that their contributions mattered. This encouraged initiative and creativity.	“We are not just told what to do. We help design our work processes.”
Learning & Growth Orientation	A culture of continuous improvement was noted, with leaders promoting training, cross-functional learning, and mentorship.	“I learned new methods from other departments through our open platform.”
Supportive Peer Environment	Coworker support was viewed as a natural extension of platform leadership, reinforcing teamwork and innovation.	“It’s easy to ask for help. We share ideas without fear of being judged.”
Flat Hierarchy & Openness	Participants highlighted the absence of rigid hierarchy, fostering open communication across levels.	“Even junior staff can talk to senior engineers without formal permission.”

Discussion

This study explored how platform leadership impacts employee innovative behavior (EIB), using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative data from 518 participants and qualitative insights from 24 in-depth interviews. The model included four mediators: organizational learning (OL), knowledge sharing (KS), psychological empowerment (PE), and coworker support (CS).

Key Findings and Interpretation

1. Platform Leadership Positively Influences Mediators The quantitative results reveal strong, statistically significant effects of platform leadership on all four mediators:

- OL ($\beta = 0.661$) had the strongest direct effect, indicating that platform leaders foster learning-driven cultures where experimentation and knowledge development thrive.
- KS ($\beta = 0.527$) and PE ($\beta = 0.478$) reflect the importance of open communication and psychological autonomy.
- CS ($\beta = 0.494$) confirms that platform leadership promotes a collaborative and trust-based work climate.

2. All Four Mediators Enhance Innovative Behavior Each mediator had a significant positive impact on EIB, with OL again being the most influential ($\beta = 0.513$). These results support the resource-based view and social exchange theory, which suggest that employees are more innovative when empowered, informed, and supported by leadership and peers.

3. Qualitative Evidence Reinforces Model Validity Thematic analysis of interviews identified trust, shared goals, and empowerment as core leadership values experienced by employees. Text mining revealed high-frequency terms like “team,” “learn,” “empower,” and “open,” directly aligning with the constructs in the SEM model. These findings triangulate with quantitative results and deepen understanding of how platform leadership is enacted in practice.

4. Cultural Relevance in the Chinese Context The findings are especially significant in the Chinese high-tech context, where traditional hierarchical leadership is still common. This study suggests that platform leadership offers a viable alternative that enhances innovation while respecting cultural norms of harmony and collectivism.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following practical and strategic recommendations are offered for firms, leaders, and policymakers in China’s high-tech manufacturing sector:

Adopt and Promote Platform Leadership Styles

Encourage leaders to share power, practice open communication, and support employee autonomy.

Provide leadership development programs that build capabilities in emotional intelligence, servant leadership, and trust-building.

Invest in Organizational Learning Infrastructure

Create internal learning platforms, mentorship programs, and cross-functional training.

Support experimentation and tolerate failure as part of the innovation process.

Foster Knowledge Sharing Culture

Establish digital tools (e.g., intranets, knowledge bases) to facilitate sharing.

Reward collaborative behavior, idea exchange, and interdepartmental cooperation.

Strengthen Psychological Empowerment

Clarify roles and link individual tasks to broader organizational goals to enhance meaning.

Give employees more control over their work and involve them in decision-making.

Enhance Coworker Support Mechanisms

Promote team-building activities and inter-team projects.

Encourage peer mentoring and recognize supportive behaviors.

Policy and System Support

Industry associations and government bodies should offer innovation leadership workshops and recognition schemes for firms adopting platform leadership.

Provide funding support for training, digital collaboration tools, and innovation labs.

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