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Organizational versus professional commitments of leaders: implications for ambidextrous learning and creativity in work teams

Sun Young Sung[a] and Jin Nam Choi[b]

[a]School of Business, Nanjing University; [b]College of Business Administration, Seoul National University

ABSTRACT

Organizational commitment has long been central to both research and practice in managing employees, as reflected in the widespread endorsement of high-commitment HRM. However, the question regarding the function of leaders' commitment remains largely unexplored. To address this gap, this study focuses on leaders' commitment to their organization and profession and investigates how these commitments shape team processes and outcome. Drawing on the leadership and ambidextrous learning literatures, we propose that leaders' organizational and professional commitments are positively related to team knowledge exploitation and exploration, respectively, which in turn predict team creativity. Our analysis of multi-wave, multi-source field data revealed that leaders' organizational commitment hindered team creativity through increased knowledge exploitation, although this negative indirect effect was mitigated in teams performing high levels of boundary-spanning activities. In contrast, leaders' professional commitment had a positive indirect effect on team creativity *via* enhanced knowledge exploration. This study contributes to the literature by illuminating how leaders' self-identities shape team learning and ultimately promote or inhibit team creativity.

KEYWORDS

Leader commitment; ambidexterity theory; team learning; boundary spanning; team creativity

Introduction

Organizational commitment is one of the most extensively studied constructs in human resource management (HRM) because of its strong associations with a wide range of favorable employee attitudinal, behavioral, and performance outcomes (Alqhaiwi et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Given its importance, researchers have examined various HR practices designed to foster employee commitment, often conceptualized as high-commitment HRM (Meijerink et al., 2020). Recent studies in the

CONTACT Jin Nam Choi jnchoi@snu.ac.kr College of Business Administration, Seoul National University, 1 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu Seoul, 08826, South Korea.

HR literature further indicate that leadership styles, such as responsible leadership (Usman et al., 2025), servant leadership (Wang et al., 2025), and ebullient leadership (Alajhar et al., 2025), can significantly influence various forms of employee commitment, with contextual factors such as developmental HRM practices serving as moderators.

Despite extensive attention to high-commitment HR practices and leadership in predicting employee commitment (Alqhaiwi et al., 2025; Usman et al., 2025), leaders' commitment itself remains largely unexplored in the HRM literature. This omission is noteworthy for several reasons. First, although leaders are organizational members who may themselves be influenced by HR practices (Bambacas, 2010), they simultaneously serve as key implementers and conduits through which such practices are communicated and enacted within their teams (Kilroy et al., 2023; Pak & Kim, 2018). Second, the assumption that leaders are inherently or automatically committed to their organizations is questionable (Valéau et al., 2021). Leaders often navigate multiple, and sometimes competing, foci of commitment, including commitments to their organization, career, and professional identity (Singh & Gupta, 2015). Third, the limited research on leaders' commitment has largely replicated theoretical frameworks originally developed for employees, emphasizing similar antecedents and outcomes (Bambacas, 2010; Gunlu et al., 2010). Such parallel treatment may be insufficient, as the nature and implications of commitment may differ substantially between leaders and employees.

To address these limitations, the present study examines how leaders' commitment shapes learning processes and, in turn, creativity in organizations, with a particular focus on work teams as the fundamental operational units (Edmondson & Nembhard, 2009). We emphasize the distinct implications of leaders' commitment for team creativity, given the central role of innovation in driving organizational performance and sustainability (Park et al., 2019). Moreover, because the present study focuses on team learning processes as a key mechanism, creativity represents a theoretically meaningful proximal outcome (Ko & Ma, 2019; March, 1991). In this regard, we distinguish creativity from more distal outcomes such as team performance or effectiveness, which are typically shaped by numerous contextual and operational factors. By contrast, team creativity directly captures the influence of leadership and team learning, as evidenced by research showing that team creativity mediates the relationship between knowledge processes and team performance (Sung & Choi, 2012).

Drawing on prior research (Hassan, 2012), we focus on two distinct forms of leader commitment: organizational and professional commitment. Organizational commitment refers to 'identification with and involvement in a particular organization' (Mowday et al., 1982, p. 27).

However, contemporary shifts toward greater workforce mobility and increasingly individual-centered career paths have heightened the relevance of professional commitment, defined as 'identification with and involvement in one's profession' (Valéau et al., 2021, p. 1828). These two forms of commitment capture different facets of leaders' self-concept, providing a more nuanced understanding of their workplace orientation (Liu & Wang, 2022).

To explore the role of these different forms of leader commitment, we focus on team learning processes. Guided by ambidextrous learning theory (Benner & Tushman, 2003; March, 1991), we identify two key learning processes, i.e. knowledge exploitation and knowledge exploration, as fundamental mechanisms underlying team creativity. Exploitation involves refining and integrating existing knowledge and skills, whereas exploration entails acquiring and applying new knowledge and capabilities (Kostopoulos & Bozionelos, 2011). Although these dual learning activities have typically been examined at the firm level as drivers of organizational innovation (Kostopoulos & Bozionelos, 2011; March, 1991), we extend this line of research by investigating their role at the team level for team creativity.

Finally, we also aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of how team learning influences team creativity by identifying boundary spanning as a critical moderating condition. Although teams' learning processes can enhance team creativity, these effects can be amplified when they also engage in boundary-spanning activities that provide additional information and fresh perspectives from external sources, including other teams, suppliers, customers, and even competitors (Faraj & Yan, 2009; Leicht-Deobald et al., 2025). The HRM literature similarly suggests that firm innovation benefits from the co-existence of commitment-oriented HRM systems, which facilitate knowledge sharing among employees, and collaboration-oriented HRM systems, which promote access to external, nonredundant knowledge (Zhou et al., 2013). Similarly, team creativity may be enhanced when teams engage in learning among members while simultaneously acquiring external knowledge through boundary-spanning activities.

In summary, this study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it broadens the scope of commitment research by shifting the focus from employees to leaders (Bambacas, 2010; Gunlu et al., 2010). Second, our examination of team-level learning processes advances prior ambidexterity research largely focused on the firm level (Duc et al., 2020; Lennerts et al., 2020). Finally, we propose a more comprehensive framework that integrates team learning processes and boundary-spanning activities as joint predictors of team creativity (Leicht-Deobald et al., 2025). We test this theoretical framework using a multi-wave, multi-source field study of work teams across diverse industries.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

This study investigates the unique cascading effects of leader commitment, aligning with leadership research that emphasizes the importance of leaders' values and self-identity in shaping follower behavior and team dynamics (Liu et al., 2012). Emerging perspectives emphasize the importance of the leader as a person, beyond their functional role: 'While research traditionally has focused on leadership as the execution of a specific function or role, scholars increasingly are interested in the person behind the leader… leaders behave in accordance with their inner convictions, values, and identities so as to fulfill their intrinsic needs for self-expression and self-consistency' (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022, pp. 1287–1290).

Leadership literature also highlights the often implicit and automatic nature of social learning, where followers observe, internalize, and emulate leaders' behaviors (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In this view, leaders exert influence not only through deliberate actions or verbal directives but also through the expression of their personal character and values (Bandura, 1997; Liu & Wang, 2022). Therefore, focusing solely on leadership styles without accounting for the leader's underlying identity and values risks overlooking a fundamental dimension of leadership. To further extend this literature, we identify leaders' identity and self-concept represented in their work-related commitments as a potent driver of team processes and performance. Our conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1.

Leader commitments and team learning processes

Team members closely observe how their leaders interpret and respond to task environments and demands, which in turn shapes team learning trajectories and affects team creativity (Bandura, 1997; Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). In this context, we conceptualize leaders' commitment patterns as a core element of their self-identity that holds meaningful implications for team functioning. Complementing a substantial body of

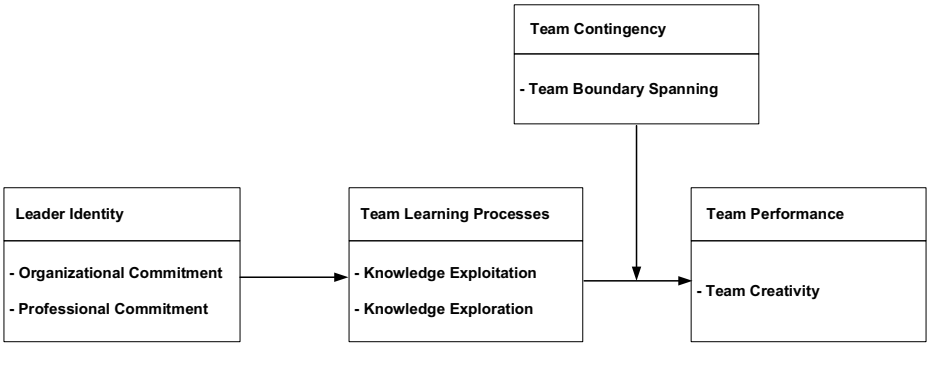

Figure 1. Theoretical framework predicting team creativity.

research on employee commitment (Liu & Wang, 2022; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer et al., 2004), the present study advances the discourse by applying the construct of commitment to examine how leaders influence team processes and outcomes.

Leader organizational commitment

When leaders strongly identify with and feel attached to their organization, they are more inclined to adopt the organization's perspective and act in its best interests (Ashforth et al., 2008). Prior research has drawn on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to explain the effects of organizational commitment, emphasizing that committed members exhibit emotional attachment and loyalty to the organization (Iqbal et al., 2022). In this sense, organizational commitment reflects a leader's willingness to internalize and uphold the organization's rules and values (Nguyen et al., 2019).

From the perspective of ambidextrous learning theory, leaders' organizational commitment appears to align more closely with knowledge exploitation, as it directs leaders' attention toward refining and leveraging existing systems, consistent with their dedication to established practices and routines (Liu & Wang, 2022; Mayer et al., 2009). As March (1996) noted, exploitation 'often thrives on commitment more than thoughtfulness… cohesiveness more than openness' (p. 280). Exploitation-related activities are typically associated with formalization, structural clarity, cohesion, and interdependence within teams (Gonzalez, 2019). Therefore, leaders with high organizational commitment are more likely to prioritize the refinement and improvement of existing knowledge rather than the adoption of novel approaches or experimentation, which may threaten organizational stability or challenge established routines (Lennerts et al., 2020; Tho & Duc, 2021). By observing these leader preferences, whether explicitly communicated or implicitly inferred, team members are likely to engage in knowledge exploitation, deepening and extending existing competencies and knowledge to enhance efficiency (Duc et al., 2020; Patky, 2020). In mirroring their leaders' behaviors, consciously or not, team members tend to rely on established procedures and prevailing performance norms (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022; Mayer et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2004). Based on this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Leader organizational commitment will be positively related to team knowledge exploitation.

Leader professional commitment

Professional commitment refers to one's identification with and psychological attachment to their profession or field of expertise (Valéau et al., 2021). Gouldner (1957) drew a fundamental distinction between

professional versus non-professional workers by classifying them as cosmopolitans versus locals, respectively. This typology implies that professionals and non-professionals differ in the degree to which they align with the values of their profession versus those of their employing organization. As knowledge workers have become increasingly central to organizational success, their values, norms, and identity have drawn heightened scholarly interest (Chang & Choi, 2007; Singh & Gupta, 2015). In contrast to non-professionals, professionals tend to be more strongly devoted to the values and standards of their work domain and seek work environments that support their professional ideals (Valéau et al., 2021). Whereas organizational commitment reflects a collective identity tied to a specific employer, professional commitment represents a more individualized orientation that is not confined to a particular organizational context (Ashforth et al., 2008).

From the perspective of ambidextrous learning theory, leaders with strong professional commitment are therefore more likely to search for and experiment with new ways of working, relatively unconstrained by existing organizational practices and policies (Gonzalez, 2019). Their attachment to professional values affords them greater flexibility and weaker adherence to organization-specific norms and routines, which in turn encourages a greater willingness to embrace uncertainty and tolerate the risks associated with experimentation (Duc et al., 2020). These exploration-oriented values can trigger downward social learning processes, through which team members observe, learn from, and internalize their leaders' attitudes and behaviors (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2012; Sung & Choi, 2021). As a result, teams led by professionally committed leaders are more inclined to engage in knowledge exploration, guided by professional norms and aspirations rather than limited by organizational conventions. Based on this rationale, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Leader professional commitment will be positively related to team knowledge exploration.

Team learning processes and team creativity

Work teams serve as the central mechanism for knowledge processing, learning, and creative problem solving in contemporary organizations (Edmondson & Nembhard, 2009). The ambidextrous learning framework distinguishes between two fundamental forms of knowledge processing represented by exploitation and exploration (Benner & Tushman, 2003; March, 1991). While initially developed to explain organization-level innovation, this dual-learning framework offers valuable insights into team creativity (Duc et al., 2020).

Team knowledge exploitation

Knowledge exploitation enables teams to effectively draw upon their existing knowledge base, building on prior experiences and established routines. This process deepens teams' familiarity with core knowledge elements and enhances their ability to use this knowledge more efficiently, thereby facilitating the recombination and reconfiguration of ideas (Mathieu & Schulze, 2006; Sung & Choi, 2012). As a result, teams can generate innovative solutions by creatively adapting and integrating existing knowledge in new and meaningful ways (Vargas et al., 2022).

Through effective exploitation, teams can incrementally enhance and fine-tune their current knowledge assets to produce immediate positive outcomes and improvements (Li et al., 2019). Members engaging in exploitation activities are typically driven to detect and correct errors, thereby improving operational performance and contributing to the broader innovation process (Gonzalez, 2019). Collectively, these efforts create a work environment in which existing knowledge is systematically leveraged and adapted, laying the groundwork for sustained innovation and long-term performance. Based on these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3:** Team knowledge exploitation will be positively related to team creativity.

Team knowledge exploration

As a core component of ambidextrous learning (Gupta et al., 2006), knowledge exploration involves activities such as 'search, variation, risk taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, and innovation' (March, 1991, p. 71). The primary goal of knowledge exploration is to acquire knowledge that lies beyond the team's existing knowledge base, enabling them to transcend the 'familiarity trap' and push past technological or conceptual boundaries (Li et al., 2018, p. 784). Accessing and integrating new knowledge is essential for teams to develop deliver creative outcomes (Benner & Tushman, 2003).

Knowledge exploration involves seeking out and experimenting with new ideas and alternative methods, which often entail uncertainty and distant outcomes (Agostini et al., 2017; Tho & Duc, 2021). When members are allowed to pursue unfamiliar ideas and take risks, they are more likely to challenge established norms and invest effort in identifying innovative solutions (Li et al., 2019). In doing so, teams can reconfigure and reinterpret information and situations to devise new approaches for solving problems (Vargas et al., 2022). Based on this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Team knowledge exploration will be positively related to team creativity.

Team learning processes as a mediating mechanism

By integrating the preceding propositions, we identify team learning processes as a key pathway through which leaders' commitments influence team creativity. Rather than contributing directly to team outputs, leaders exert influence indirectly by guiding team processes in accordance with their personal identities and values (Sherman, 1991; Sung & Choi, 2021). Thus, we propose that leaders' organizational commitment and professional commitment increase team creativity by facilitating knowledge exploitation and exploration, respectively. Based on this reasoning, we advance the following mediation hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: Team knowledge exploitation will mediate the relationship between leader organizational commitment and team creativity.

Hypothesis 6: Team knowledge exploration will mediate the relationship between leader professional commitment and team creativity.

Team boundary spanning as a positive moderating contingency

Thus far, we have hypothesized that teams can improve their creative performance through distinct learning processes shaped by leaders' commitment patterns. However, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how learning processes drive team creativity, it is essential to consider a critical yet frequently overlooked dimension of teamwork: the team's interaction with its external environment (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Choi, 2002; Leicht-Deobald et al., 2025). While team learning plays a vital role in enabling innovative problem solving, these effects can be further enhanced by the degree to which teams acquire information and knowledge from external sources as well (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013; Faraj & Yan, 2009). In line with this perspective, we identify team boundary spanning, defined as 'a team's actions to establish links and manage interactions with individuals and groups inside and outside the organization' (Carbonell & Escudero, 2019, p. 149), as a critical team activity that can amplify the positive effects of team learning processes on team creativity.

For teams engaging in knowledge exploitation (Patky, 2020), team boundary spanning can serve as a valuable complement by incorporating external perspectives and information from other teams and organizations, thereby mitigating the potential limitations of focusing on internal, consolidated knowledge (Yang et al., 2022). This external engagement

helps counteract the risks of overdependence on familiar knowledge by exposing teams to varied insights and new trends (Faraj & Yan, 2009; Leicht-Deobald et al., 2025). Through boundary-spanning activities, teams can become more attuned to evolving environmental demands and acquire diverse external knowledge that challenges their reliance on established routines and encourages the redirection toward novel objectives (Lennerts et al., 2020). Accordingly, we propose that team boundary spanning acts as a positive contingency for the indirect effect of leaders' organizational commitment on team creativity, leading to the following moderated mediation hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7: Team boundary spanning will positively moderate the indirect relationship between leader organizational commitment and team creativity through team knowledge exploitation, such that the relationship will be more positive when it is high than low.

Likewise, the beneficial effect of team knowledge exploration on team creativity can be strengthened through active boundary-spanning efforts. Effective knowledge exploration relies on the integration of both internal insights and external information flows, requiring teams to assimilate cognitive resources from beyond their immediate boundaries (Choi, 2002; Faraj & Yan, 2009; Zhou et al., 2013). Such exploration is supported by cross-functional and cross-organizational exchanges that stimulate discovery and experimentation (Gonzalez, 2019; Leicht-Deobald et al., 2025). By engaging with external actors, teams can access valuable knowledge on emerging environmental demands, technological advancements, and stakeholder perspectives, thereby enhancing their capacity to generate novel ideas (Duc et al., 2020). Therefore, we propose that team boundary spanning amplifies the positive indirect relationship between leaders' professional commitment and team creativity.

Hypothesis 8: Team boundary spanning will positively moderate the indirect relationship between leader professional commitment and team creativity through team knowledge exploration, such that the relationship will be more positive when it is high than low.

Method

Sample and data collection

To empirically test our theoretical framework, we collected data from managers enrolled in a part-time executive MBA program at a major university in South Korea. After briefly presenting the study's objectives, we invited 100 managers to voluntarily participate in a multiwave, multisource online survey with a nominal incentive of a five-dollar gift card as a token of appreciation. Each manager was also asked to randomly

select and invite at least three of their team members to complete a separate survey designed for team members. At Time 1 (T1), 83 team leaders and 260 team members completed their respective surveys, resulting in response rates of 83% and 86.6%, respectively.

At Time 2 (T2), conducted four weeks after T1, we re-contacted the original 83 team leaders who had participated in the initial data collection. Of these, 64 managers completed and returned the T2 questionnaire. We then carefully matched leader and member responses across the two time points and excluded teams that had only one participating member or lacked matched responses between leaders and members. After this screening process, the final sample consisted of 172 team members who completed the T1 survey and 52 team leaders who completed both T1 and T2 surveys. In the final sample, the average number of participating team members was 3.31 (SD = 1.52), excluding the leader.

The teams represented a wide range of industries including finance/insurance, manufacturing, mobile communication, service and public enterprises. They also performed diverse organizational functions, including general management (19.2%), finance/accounting (32.7%), sales (9.6%), marketing (17.3%), and R&D/software/technology (21.2%). Among the participating team leaders and members, 23.1% and 46.2% were female, respectively. Their average organizational tenure was 16.72 years for leaders (SD = 7.93) and 7.69 years for members (SD = 7.58). Age distribution was as follows: under 30 years (3.1% of leaders, 31.5% of members), 30–39 years (20.3% and 37.7%), 40–49 years (43.8% and 25.8%), and 50 years or older (32.8% and 5.0%). Regarding education levels, 7.8% of leaders and 6.9% of members held a high school diploma, 7.8% and 16.2% held a two-year college degree, 56.3% and 61.2% held an undergraduate degree, and 28.1% and 15.8% held a graduate degree.

Measures

To mitigate potential issues related to common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003), data were collected from two sources across two time points. At T1, leaders assessed their organizational and professional commitment, while team members rated their team's learning processes (knowledge exploitation and exploration) and team boundary spanning. At T2, leaders evaluated team creativity. All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The constructs reported by team members demonstrated acceptable within-group agreement ($r_{wg(j)}$) and intraclass correlations (ICC(1), ICC(2)), indicating sufficient consensus among team members to justify group-level aggregation (Chen et al., 2004).

Leader commitments (leaders, T1)

We adopted items from the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday et al., 1982). We assessed the leaders' organizational commitment using the following three items ($\alpha = 0.84$): (a) 'I proudly talk to others about this company,' (b) 'I feel emotionally attached to this company,' and (c) 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this company.' The three items for the leaders' professional commitment ($\alpha = 0.86$) were as follows: (a) 'I proudly talk to others about my profession/occupation,' (b) 'I feel a sense of belonging to my profession/occupation,' and (c) 'I feel emotionally attached to my profession/occupation.'

Team knowledge exploitation and exploration (members, T1)

We adopted measurement items from Li et al. (2019) to assess the team learning processes. We measured knowledge exploitation using the following three items ($\alpha = 0.75$, $r_{wg(3)} = 0.88$, ICC(1) = 0.11, ICC(2) = 0.34, $F = 1.51$, $p < 0.05$): (a) 'In the team, our aim is to search for information to refine common methods and ideas to solve work problems,' (b) 'In the team, we search for the usual and generally proven methods and solutions to perform our tasks,' and (c) 'In the team, we use information acquisition methods (e.g. survey of prior project reports) that can help us understand and update our current tasks and work problems.' We assessed knowledge exploration using the following three items ($\alpha = 0.76$, $r_{wg(3)} = 0.85$, ICC(1) = 0.10, ICC(2) = 0.32, $F = 1.46$, $p < 0.05$): (a) 'In the team, our aim is to collect new information that will force us to learn new things for the current tasks,' (b) 'In the team, we look for opportunities to employ completely new skills and knowledge to solve work problems,' and (c) 'Our team members are willing to take risks on new ideas or concepts to perform their tasks.'

Team boundary spanning (members, T1)

We used a three-item scale ($\alpha = 0.81$, $r_{wg(3)} = 0.83$, ICC(1) = 0.10, ICC(2) = 0.33, $F = 1.47$, $p < 0.05$) to assess team boundary spanning by adopting items from Ancona and Caldwell (1992). The three items were as follows: (a) 'Our team tries to find out what competing firms or groups are doing for similar projects,' (b) 'Our team acquires the resources we need (e.g. money, new members, equipment, and know-how) from other groups or individuals outside the company,' and 'Our team coordinates project-related activities with other groups.'

Team creativity (leaders, T2)

We adopted three items to measure team creativity (Sung & Choi, 2012). The leaders rated the following three items (α = 89): 'Our team generates original solutions for problems,' (b) 'Our team searches for new working methods, techniques, or instruments,' and (c) 'Our team finds new approaches to execute tasks.'

Control variables

Prior team research has emphasized the importance of team composition, such as team size and members' demographic characteristics, as a critical input factor influencing team creativity and innovation (Anderson et al., 2014; Hülsheger et al., 2009). Team size, in particular, can significantly shape team processes and outcomes, as larger teams often possess greater resources and assets to facilitate innovation (Byron et al., 2023). Moreover, members' demographic characteristics can influence team learning processes, thereby affecting teams' creative performance (Anderson et al., 2014; Byron et al., 2023). Accordingly, we controlled for the following member-level demographic variables in our analysis: gender (0 = male, 1 = female), education level (1 = high school graduate, 2 = two-year college, 3 = undergraduate degree, 4 = graduate degree), and organizational tenure (in years).

Results

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate the empirical validity of the measurement scales. Results indicated that the hypothesized six-factor model provided an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2(120) = 141.40$, $p = 0.08$; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.059) and showed a significantly better fit than all alternative measurement models (all $p < 0.001$; see Table 1). All indicators loaded significantly onto their respective latent factors ($p < 0.001$), and the inter-factor covariances were low to moderate (all below 0.25), supporting both the convergent and discriminant validity of the measures. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among variables are reported in Table 2.

Hypothesized structural model and plausible alternative models

Following the CFA that confirmed the empirical validity of the measures, we conducted a structural path analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the hypothesized relationships among constructs. SEM enables an omnibus test of complex predictive relationships across multiple outcomes and stages. Our full model initially included 18

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis.

Model	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*	CFI	RMSEA	AIC
Six-factor model: Hypothesized measurement model	141.40 (120)	.09	.95	.05	243.40
Five-factor model: Knowledge exploitation and exploration collapsed as a single factor	190.74 (125)	.00	.85	.10	282.74
Five-factor model: Leader organizational and professional commitment collapsed as a single factor	175.99 (125)	.00	.88	.08	267.99
Four-factor model: Leader organizational and professional commitment, and team knowledge exploitation and exploration collapsed as a single factor, respectively	224.44 (129)	.00	.78	.12	308.45
Three-factor model: Knowledge exploitation, exploration, and team boundary spanning collapsed as a single factor	279.03 (132)	.00	.66	.15	357.03
Two-factor model: Leader-ratings and Member-ratings each representing a single factor	360.68 (134)	.00	.47	.18	434.68
Single-factor model: All variables collapsed as a single factor	402.96 (135)	.00	.38	.19	474.96

indicators representing six focal variables and four control variables, totaling 231 parameters to estimate [22(22 − 1)/2 = 231]. Given the current sample size of 52 teams, estimating such a large number of parameters would be unreliable. Therefore, in line with recommendations for small-sample SEM, we conducted the path analysis using scale means for each construct rather than item-level indicators (Bandalos & Finney, 2001).

We initially constructed a structural model that included all hypothesized paths outlined in Hypotheses 1 through 6. However, the model exhibited a relatively poor fit to the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999), with fit indices as follows: χ^2 (df = 12) = 25.95, $p = 0.01$; CFI = 0.85; RMSEA = .15. To explore the theoretically plausible alternative relations, we examined the possibility of cross-effects between leader commitments and team learning, namely, both organizational and professional commitment of leaders predicting both knowledge exploitation and exploration. The fit of this alternative model did not substantially differ from that of the hypothesized model (χ^2 (df = 10) = 23.88, $p = 0.00$; CFI = 0.85; RMSEA = 0.16), indicating that the hypothesized paths from leader commitment to team learning are conceptually and empirically distinct.

In the second alternative model, we tested whether knowledge exploitation and exploration served as partial rather than full mediators of the relationship between leader commitments and team creativity. To assess this, we added direct paths from organizational and professional commitment to team creativity. This partial mediation model demonstrated a good fit to the data (χ^2 (df = 10) = 14.98, $p = 0.13$; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.09), and significantly outperformed the full mediation model, suggesting that the mediating effects may be partial rather than full ($\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf = 2) = 10.97, $p = 0.004$).

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Variables	*M*	*SD*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*
1. Team Size	12.71	3.38	– –									
2. Male Proportion	0.52	.37	−.15	– –								
3. Average Education	2.80	.62	−.05	−.64**	– –							
4. Average Tenure	7.03	5.18	.30*	−.29*	.22	– –						
5. Leader Organizational Commitment	3.89	.65	−.15	−.23	.44**	.20	– –					
6. Leader Professional Commitment	3.92	.66	−.15	−.32*	.34*	.15	.56**	– –				
7. Knowledge Exploitation	3.88	.33	−.03	.19	−.22	−.22	.07	−.12	– –			
8. Knowledge Exploration	3.67	.42	−.04	.08	−.01	.10	.04	.23	−.25	– –		
9. Team Boundary Spanning	3.47	.43	−.07	.07	−.09	−.17	−.11	−.09	.13	.32*	– –	
10. Team Creativity	3.39	.77	.11	−.44**	.42**	.11	.37**	.44**	−.42*	.27*	.15	– –

Note: Unit of analysis is work teams ($N = 52$).
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

Finally, in the third alternative model, we tested a parallel effects structure in which leader commitment and team learning processes (knowledge exploitation and exploration) independently predicted team creativity, rather than assuming a mediating relationship. This model showed a better overall fit than the hypothesized full mediation model (χ^2 (df = 21) = 30.82, $p = 0.07$; CFI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.09), but the improvement in fit was not statistically significant ($p = 0.84$). Therefore, we retained the partial mediation model as the final and best-fitting model, as it not only provided a superior empirical fit but also offered a theoretically plausible explanation of the observed relationships (see Figure 2).

Hypothesis testing

Among the control variables, members' organizational tenure and gender emerged as significant predictors of team creativity ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.05$ and $\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$, respectively).

Main effects

Hypothesis 1 proposed a positive relationship between leaders' organizational commitment and team knowledge exploitation. The results revealed a positive, marginally significant association between the two variables ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.10$; see Figure 2), lending tentative support to Hypothesis 1. Given the limited sample size at the team level, this pattern should be noted as meaningful, although further empirical validation is warranted.

Hypothesis 2 posited a positive relationship between leaders' professional commitment and knowledge exploration. Supporting this expectation, leader professional commitment was significantly and positively associated with team knowledge exploration ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$).

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted positive effects of knowledge exploitation and exploration on team creativity. Contrary to Hypothesis 3,

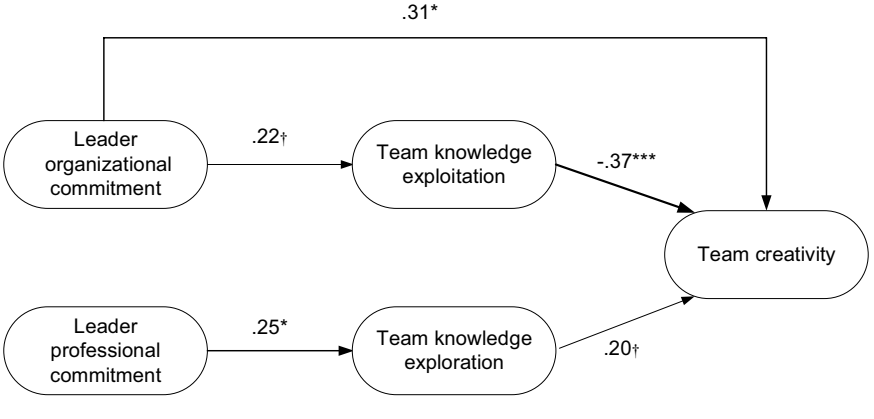

Figure 2. Leader commitments in team knowledge exploitation, exploration and creativity.

knowledge exploitation showed a significant negative relationship with team creativity (β = −0.37, $p < 0.001$), disconfirming our theoretical expectation. In contrast, knowledge exploration had a marginally significant positive effect on team creativity (β = 0.20, $p < 0.10$), offering partial support for Hypothesis 4.

Mediating effects

Hypotheses 5 and 6 posited that team knowledge exploitation and exploration mediate the effects of leaders' organizational and professional commitments on team creativity, respectively. Using a bootstrapping procedure to estimate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2007), we evaluated the proposed mediation effects.

As shown in Table 3, leader organizational commitment had a significant but negative indirect effect on team creativity through team knowledge exploitation (b = −0.13, 95% CI [−0.28, −0.01]), contrary to the hypothesized positive direction. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported. In contrast, leader professional commitment demonstrated a significant and positive indirect effect on team creativity through team knowledge exploration ($b = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.34]), providing support for Hypothesis 6.

Moderated mediation effects

Hypotheses 7 and 8 proposed that team boundary spanning would positively moderate the indirect effects of leaders' organizational and professional commitments on team creativity *via* knowledge exploitation and exploration, respectively. To test these hypotheses, we first examined the simple moderating effects of team boundary spanning on the second-stage relationships. All variables were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity between main effects and interaction terms (Katrichis, 1993).

In line with Hypothesis 7, team boundary spanning significantly and positively moderated the relationship between knowledge exploitation and team creativity (β = 0.24, $p < 0.05$). As shown in Figure 3, a simple slope analysis (Aiken et al., 1991) revealed that when boundary spanning

Table 3. Indirect effects for mediation Hypotheses.

				Bootstrapped Bias-corrected 95% CI	
Independent Variable	Mediator	Dependent Variable	Indirect Effect	*Lower Limit*	*Upper Limit*
Leader Organizational Commitment	Team Knowledge Exploitation	Team Creativity	**−.13**	**−.28**	**−.01**
Leader Professional Commitment	Team Knowledge Exploration		**.08**	**.01**	**.34**

Note: Bootstrap sample size = 5,000; coefficients in bold indicate significant mediation; CI = confidence interval.

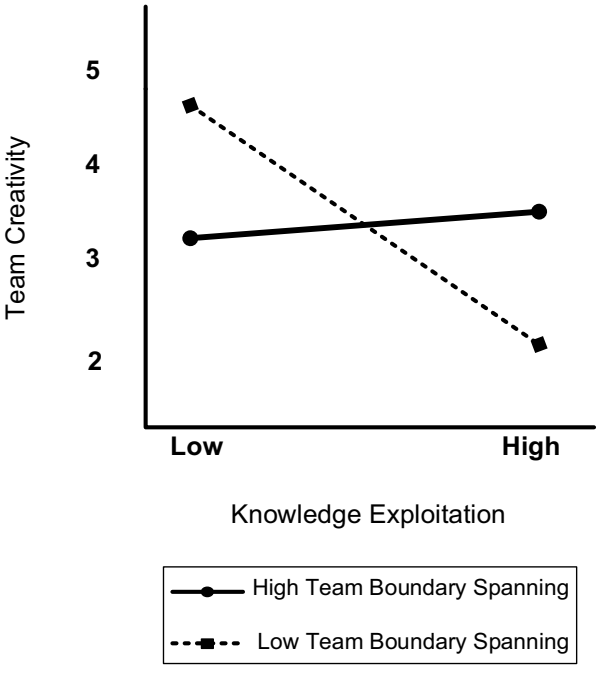

Figure 3. Interaction between team knowledge exploitation and boundary spanning activities in predicting team creativity.

was low, knowledge exploitation had a significant negative effect on team creativity (b = −0.71, $p < 0.01$), but this effect became nonsignificant when boundary spanning was high ($b = 0.17$, *ns.*). In contrast, the interaction between team boundary spanning and knowledge exploration was not significant.

Next, we directly examined the hypothesized moderated mediation effects. As shown in Table 4, leader organizational commitment had a significant negative conditional indirect effect on team creativity through knowledge exploitation in teams with low boundary spanning (b = −0.17, 95% CI [−0.43, −0.01]). However, this indirect effect became nonsignificant in teams with high boundary spanning (b = −0.10, 95% CI [−0.34, 0.12]). In contrast, the conditional indirect effects of leader professional commitment on team creativity *via* knowledge exploration were not statistically significant. Thus, the moderating role of team boundary spanning was supported only for the indirect effect involving knowledge exploitation, confirming Hypothesis 7 and disconfirming Hypothesis 8.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study is to theorize and empirically validate that leaders' commitment plays a distinct role at the team level, one that should be differentiated from the effects of employees' commitment.

Table 4. Bootstrapped conditional indirect effects for moderated mediation.

Independent Variable	Moderator	Mediator	Dependent Variable	Moderator Level	Conditional Indirect Effect	Bootstrapped Bias-corrected 95% CI	
						Lower Limit	*Upper Limit*
Leader Organizational Commitment Leader Professional Commitment	Team Boundary Spanning	Team Knowledge Exploitation	Team Creativity	**Lo (Mean−1SD)**	**−.17**	**−.43**	**−.01**
				Hi (Mean + 1SD)	−.10	−.34	.12
		Team Knowledge Exploration		Lo (Mean−1SD)	.10	−.01	.46
				Hi (Mean + 1SD)	.02	−.12	.35

Note: Bootstrap sample size = 5,000; coefficients in bold indicate significant conditional indirect effect; CI = confidence interval.

High-commitment HRM is grounded in the notion that employees' organizational commitment serves as a robust and well-established predictor of favorable attitudes, behaviors, and performance in the workplace (Alqhaiwi et al., 2025; Meijerink et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025). Similar positive outcomes have been documented for commitment among leaders in managerial positions (Bambacas, 2010; Gunlu et al., 2010). However, due to leaders' unique status and their role as agents of the organization, tasked with representing organizational interests and implementing HR practices (Eisenberger et al., 2010; Kilroy et al., 2023; Pak & Kim, 2018), their commitment may influence collective processes and outcomes in ways that parallel the effects of high-commitment HRM, thereby shaping team interactions and overall team performance. Drawing on ambidextrous learning theory, this study examined how distinct forms of leaders' commitment influence team creativity by activating different learning processes of work teams. In the following sections, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the current findings, acknowledge the study's limitations, and suggest avenues for future research.

Implications of leader commitments for team learning processes

The present analysis extends the dominant emphasis on leadership styles by highlighting the influence of leaders' work-related self-identity, which can shape team processes through cascading effects rooted in social learning (Bandura, 1997; Sherman, 1991). Beyond explicit managerial actions or directives, leaders serve as symbolic models who convey 'an image that helps define for the followers just what kinds of traits, values, beliefs and behaviors it is good and legitimate to develop' (Shamir et al., 1993, pp. 584–585). Team members are likely to internalize and mirror their leaders' values and behaviors, which is aligned with the notion of downward social learning (Li et al., 2019; Sung & Choi, 2021). Our findings demonstrate that leaders' identity and commitment patterns significantly influence team members' learning activities, which in turn drive team creativity.

Our empirical findings revealed several important and somewhat unexpected patterns. While leaders' organizational commitment was a marginally significant positive predictor of team knowledge exploitation, knowledge exploitation itself showed a significant negative effect on team creativity. Consequently, contrary to our hypothesis, leaders' organizational commitment had a significant negative indirect effect on team creativity through knowledge exploitation. At the same time, however, leaders' organizational commitment demonstrated a significant *direct* positive effect on team creativity, suggesting that its influence is multifaceted.

This pattern implies that although organizationally committed leaders may guide their teams toward routine-oriented learning processes (i.e. exploitation), which can dampen creativity, they may simultaneously promote creativity through other pathways. For instance, leaders who strongly identify with their organization often instill a shared vision and collective purpose among team members, enhancing motivation, engagement, and proactive behaviors (Alqhaiwi et al., 2025). Future research may explore and contrast the cognitive, motivational, and social consequences of leaders' organizational commitment to better understand these divergent pathways and their implications for team creativity.

Consistent with our hypothesis, leaders' professional commitment was positively associated with team members' engagement in explorative learning activities, which in turn enhanced team creativity. Leaders who are strongly committed to their profession may demonstrate lower allegiance to their employer, as their primary identification lies with their professional domain rather than the organization itself (Hassan, 2012; Valéau et al., 2021). This independence from organizational norms enables them to question entrenched routines and challenge prevailing assumptions that may hinder innovation (Chang & Choi, 2007). Such leaders can foster an environment that encourages team members to pursue novel ideas and engage in experimentation beyond existing knowledge boundaries, ultimately promoting creative team outcomes.

Our analysis suggests that leaders' organizational and professional commitments shape distinct team processes and outcomes. While organizational commitment has been widely recognized as beneficial for individual and organizational outcomes among employees (Usman et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025), its implications at the leader level may differ. Specifically, leaders with strong organizational commitment may promote knowledge exploitation and adherence to established routines, which can inadvertently stifle team creativity. Such leaders are more likely to align closely with existing organizational norms and less inclined to question or deviate from prevailing paradigms (Valéau et al., 2021), thereby limiting opportunities for innovation. These findings underscore that the scope, direction, and nature of the consequences from organizational and professional commitment may diverge for employees versus leaders. Given that leaders and frontline managers serve as key agents in enacting HRM practices, including high-commitment HRM (Kilroy et al., 2023; Pak & Kim, 2018), a more nuanced understanding of how their commitment patterns influence team performance is warranted.

Implications of team learning processes for team creativity

In line with prior research on ambidextrous learning (Gonzalez, 2019; Patky, 2020), our findings indicate that teams can increase creative

outcomes by engaging in knowledge exploration. However, contrary to our expectations, knowledge exploitation was found to be a negative predictor of team creativity. Exploitation improves efficiency and reliability by drawing on established knowledge as readily available solutions (Gupta et al., 2006; Tho & Duc, 2021). However, heavy reliance on accumulated knowledge can reduce the motivation to pursue exploratory search or alternative approaches, thereby constraining the generation of novel solutions (Gonzalez, 2019; Lennerts et al., 2020). This aligns with the notion of organizational inertia, which suggests that previously successful strategies and routines can become barriers to change and innovation (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Prior research indicates that while exploitation supports incremental improvements and efficiency-focused refinements, it typically does not promote radical changes or innovation (Li et al., 2019). Thus, the negative association between knowledge exploitation and team creativity may reflect the tendency for such activities to yield minor enhancements rather than truly novel outcomes.

In the organizational learning and innovation literature, 'ambidexterity' refers to the simultaneous pursuit and integration of exploitation and exploration (Agostini et al., 2017; Benner & Tushman, 2003; March, 1991). Recognizing the potential interactive dynamics between knowledge exploitation and exploration, we conducted a follow-up response surface analysis to examine their joint and congruent effects on team creativity (Shanock et al., 2010). Interestingly, the results revealed that team creativity peaked under the condition of low exploitation and high exploration, rather than when both were high. Team creativity was next highest when exploitation was high and exploration was low, followed by the condition where both dimensions were high. The lowest creativity emerged when both were low. These findings suggest that teams may derive greater creative benefits from incongruent combinations, where either exploitation or exploration is emphasized, than from the simultaneous pursuit of both at high levels. This pattern calls into question the universal applicability of ambidexterity for team-level creativity and highlights the need for further research on the nuanced interplay between exploitation and exploration across different performance domains.

Team boundary spanning as a moderating contingency

Our analysis further examined the moderating role of team boundary spanning in shaping the relationship between learning processes and team creativity. We posited that the effectiveness of team learning would be enhanced when teams simultaneously engage in external knowledge acquisition (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013; Faraj & Yan, 2009). While the hypothesized moderating effect was not supported for the link

between knowledge exploration and team creativity, our prediction was confirmed for knowledge exploitation. Specifically, the negative effect of knowledge exploitation on team creativity was neutralized and became nonsignificant among teams with high levels of boundary-spanning activity. Similarly, the negative indirect effect of leaders' organizational commitment on team creativity through knowledge exploitation was no longer significant when boundary spanning was high.

To further examine the significant moderating effect, we applied the Johnson–Neyman technique to identify the region of significance for the conditional effect of knowledge exploitation across varying levels of team boundary spanning (Fraas & Newman, 1997). The analysis revealed that the negative effect of knowledge exploitation on team creativity was significant when team boundary spanning was below 3.64 on a five-point Likert scale, which was the threshold at which the upper bound of the confidence interval began to include zero. This finding suggests that exploitative learning did not hinder team creativity when boundary-spanning activities were slightly above the sample mean (3.47). In contrast, when team boundary spanning was below 3.64, knowledge exploitation significantly undermined team creativity.

Knowledge exploration represents a dynamic learning activity, whereas knowledge exploitation is comparatively static, oriented toward reliability, productivity, and efficiency through the utilization of consolidated knowledge (Lennerts et al., 2020; Tho & Duc, 2021). While exploitation offers potential benefits, it may detach teams from rapidly evolving business environments (Patky, 2020; Vargas et al., 2022). Consequently, exploitation-focused teams are prone to fall behind emerging trends and exhibit limited adaptability to changing demands. In such contexts, team boundary spanning can buffer these negative effects by enabling teams to maintain external communication channels and interact with outside stakeholders (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Carbonell & Escudero, 2019). Conversely, when teams become insular and restrict knowledge inflows from external sources, the dysfunctional consequences of exploitative learning are likely to intensify. In contrast, for teams already engaged in knowledge exploration, boundary spanning may be less critical, as these teams are actively seeking and acquiring novel insights through their explorative learning efforts, rendering external inputs somewhat redundant (Gonzalez, 2019).

Practical implications

The present conceptual and empirical analysis offers several implications for team leaders and organizations. First, given their influential role in shaping follower behavior and team processes, leaders should be mindful

of if their self-identity and personal values align with team goals and the surrounding work environment. Where misalignment exists, some degree of value adjustment or reorientation may be necessary to enhance team effectiveness. Furthermore, our findings on the distinct effects of leaders' organizational and professional commitments suggest that organizations should carefully consider leaders' identity orientations when assigning them to teams with varying functional demands, such as efficiency, adaptability, or innovation. For instance, if the goal is to foster creativity through refining existing tools, appointing leaders with strong organizational commitment can be effective, provided that team boundary spanning is actively encouraged to offset the potential downsides of exploitative learning.

Second, challenging the dominant view of ambidexterity, our post hoc analysis suggests that simultaneously pursuing both exploitative and explorative learning may not be the most effective strategy for enhancing team creativity. Teams that focused solely on knowledge exploration achieved the highest levels of creativity, whereas those attempting to balance both forms of learning exhibited diminished creative outcomes. This pattern echoes the 'stuck in the middle' dilemma (Porter, 1980), where organizations pursuing conflicting strategies, such as differentiation and cost minimization, fail to achieve excellence in either. Similarly, teams that strive for ambidexterity in learning may encounter conflicting priorities and diluted focus, undermining creative performance. Based on these findings, we recommend that team leaders adopt a 'select and concentrate' approach by focusing strategically on either exploration or exploitation, depending on team goals and contextual demands, rather than attempting to pursue both simultaneously.

Finally, leaders should actively promote boundary-spanning activities as a vital means of connecting teams with their external environment and staying responsive to evolving demands (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013; Choi, 2002). Our findings indicate that such external engagement is especially valuable for teams that primarily engage in knowledge exploitation. In these cases, boundary spanning can offset the limitations of excessive internal focus and overreliance on established knowledge. Leaders who closely identify with their organization should be mindful of these potential drawbacks and receive training to broaden their team's perspective through outreach. Moreover, boundary spanning appears most effective when undertaken by leaders themselves and directed toward external stakeholders outside the organization rather than inside, as highlighted in a recent meta-analysis (Leicht-Deobald et al., 2025). This underscores the importance of strategic, leader-led external engagement in enhancing team adaptability and creative performance.

Study limitations and future research directions

Our findings should be interpreted with caution in light of several limitations. First, leaders' commitments were assessed through self-reports, as follower ratings may be influenced by their perceptions and relationships with leaders, potentially introducing perceptual bias (Cogliser et al., 2009). Nonetheless, self-reports may also be subject to social desirability bias, which can vary depending on individual traits and contextual factors within the team or organization. To address these concerns, future research should consider employing unobtrusive or behavioral measures of commitment and utilize experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

Second, the cultural and organizational context of our study may have influenced the findings. South Korea is characterized by high levels of collectivism and power distance, and Korean organizations often emphasize employee loyalty and dedication. As team leaders accumulate tenure and undergo organizational socialization, they may develop strong psychological ties to their organization alongside professional pride and expertise. These sample characteristics may have contributed to the observed negative effects of leaders' organizational commitment on team creativity. Future research may examine the generalizability of our findings across different cultural and national contexts.

Finally, while the current research design involving multiple sources (leaders and members) and multiple waves (T1 and T2 leader reports) offers reasonable confidence in our findings, they should be interpreted with caution given the relatively small team-level sample size. Although prior team research suggests that sample sizes of 30–50 teams are generally adequate for detecting medium effects (Mathieu et al., 2014), larger samples provide greater statistical power and improve the robustness and generalizability of findings. Accordingly, future research should seek to replicate and extend our theoretical model using larger samples of organizational teams and/or field-experimental designs.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study makes meaningful contributions to the HRM literature and offers novel insights. While prior research has extensively documented the effects of employee organizational commitment on various workplace outcomes (Alajhar et al., 2025; Usman et al., 2025), comparatively little is known about how leaders' commitment shapes team dynamics and influences collective outcomes. The present findings underscore the importance of examining leaders' personal inclinations and self-concepts as mechanisms through which leaders influence team learning and creativity. Future research may further investigate how

different patterns of leader commitment affect team-level social, affective, and motivational processes, as well as various forms of collective performance. Moreover, subsequent studies should explore a wider range of organizational and team-level contextual factors, such as structure, strategy, climate, and resource availability, that may moderate or condition the effects of leader commitment on various outcomes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Seoul National University Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 2406/001–017). Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation, in accordance with IRB-approved procedures.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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