

## Enhancing strategic agility through paradoxical leadership

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**Abstract :** Our study aims to explore the role of paradoxical leadership behaviors in enhancing strategic agility of organizations. The study attempts to provide an integrated theoretical framework for the most important issues proposed by writers and researchers regarding the variables of the study, in addition to a practical analytical framework for the opinions of a number of department heads and teaching staff in (17) private colleges and universities in the middle Euphrates region in Iraq. The study sample included (133) departments heads, and (218) teaching staff in those colleges.

Our paper used the questionnaire as a tool to collect data, and a number of statistical methods were used to analyze data with the help of (Smart PLS) program. The study reached the validity of the hypothesis regarding the effect of paradoxical leadership behaviors on strategic agility . The study introduced a number of recommendations related to its topic, including the necessity of adopting a set of paradoxical behaviors by leaders to enhance strategic agility in private universities and colleges.

**Keywords:** paradoxical leadership behaviors, strategic agility , private colleges and universities.

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**Introduction:** The business's success and continuity depend on its ability to understand how the external environment affects its competitive strategy and position. This environment has become more dynamic, and organizations encounter many challenges to lead in such environment. As Lewis et al, . (2014) stated that in hyper competitive environment , organizational survival depends on strategic agility which is inherently contradictory. To be strategic, organizations have to develop a strategic plan through a formal planning process and constant commitment to implement this plan in the long term. To be agile on the other side, organizations have to be flexible and nimble to respond quickly to changing environment . This contradictory characteristic of strategic agility requires paradoxical thinking from the leader to manage these contradictions and employ a set of paradoxical behaviors that are relevant to deal with them. They stated that leadership is central to managing tensions of strategic agility and asked two questions. First, why managing paradox is critical to strategic agility . Second, which practices and behaviors enable leaders to effectively manage tensions of strategic agility ? In this study, we try to explore the impact of paradoxical leadership behaviors on strategic agility in (17) private colleges and universities in the Middle Euphrates region in Iraq. The study sample included (133) departments heads and (218) teaching staff working in the private colleges and universities in the middle Euphrates region in Iraq .We choose this sector as a field of the study because educational institutions bear a great responsibility in transforming societies to achieve rapid response to the change occurs in our country. The researchers hope to introduce some suggestions that may help these institutions in building a clear view of their strategies and keep them away from inactivity and pay attention to contradictions to confront future challenges.

### 1. The study methodology

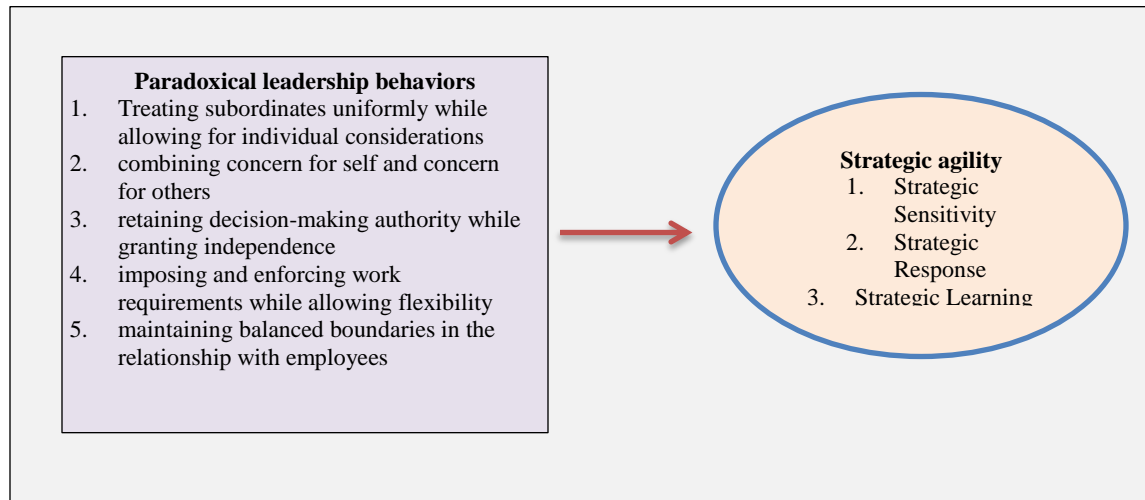
#### 1.1 The study measures

The study used the questionnaire as a tool to collect data .The questionnaire consists of two scales. The first one is devoted to paradoxical leadership behaviors which items are adapted from (Zhang et al . , 2015) and the second scales is devoted to strategic agility which items are adapted from (Omar, 2019) . To carry out the test, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was adopted, which studies indicated its acceptance with values greater than 0.70 ( Chen & Huang, 2007) . Carrying out the application of the test, it became clear that the paradoxical leadership behaviors recorder an acceptable reliability coefficient of ( 0.917 ) and together recorded ( 0.970 ) which indicated that all axes reflect acceptable results.

#### 1.2 The hypothesized model

The hypothesized model of the study represents a simplified, brief, and hypothetical diagram of the phenomenon under study, and identifies the effect relationships expressed by hypothetical arrows that have not yet been tested. This diagram reflects a set of hypotheses that were built primarily on the possibility of measuring each variable of the study and the extent of the diagram's comprehensiveness and possibility. Figure(1) depicts the hypothetical model of the study.

Figure (1) The hypothesized model:



### 1.3 The hypotheses of the study

The main hypothesis of the study is that: There is a significant effect of paradoxical leadership behaviors on strategic agility, from which a number of sub-hypotheses are derived, as followings:

**1st hypothesis:** There is a significant effect of treating subordinates uniformly while allowing for individual considerations on strategic agility.

**2nd hypothesis:** There is a significant effect of the combination of self-interest and concern for others on strategic agility.

**3rd hypothesis:** There is a significant effect of retaining decision power and granting independence on strategic agility.

**4th hypothesis:** There is a significant effect of imposing and enforcing business requirements while allowing flexibility on strategic agility.

**5th hypothesis:** There is a significant effect of maintaining balanced boundaries in the relationship with employees on strategic agility.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Paradoxical leadership

Literature indicates that the word “paradox” is derived from the Greek word “Paradoxa.” The word “para” means “to disagree,” while the word “Doxa” refers to “opinion.” It is a phrase that may seem impossible or difficult to understand because it contains two characteristics or two conflicting facts. (Schad et al, 2016:12). (Chen et al., 2021:1) defined paradoxical leadership as an emerging leadership style that describes leadership behaviors that appear contradictory but are interconnected and address competing workplace demands simultaneously and over time. (Jia et al., 2021:2) pointed out that it is a concept that integrates the ancient Chinese philosophy of (yin-yang) into modern leadership theory, as paradoxical leaders adopt behaviors that appear to be competing but interconnected to meet the demands of organization and their followers simultaneously in the long term. It is a style of leadership behavior that appears contradictory on the surface but is interrelated in reality. It adopts administrative methods such as self and others, intimacy and alienation, personality and consistency, reinforcement and flexibility, control and independence to confront simultaneous and continuous contradictions in the workplace (Pan, 2022:20). (Backhaus et al., 2022:6) defined them as contradictory but interconnected elements that are logical when isolated and illogical when they appear. Paradoxical leadership meets the dual needs of organizational structuring and employee personalization by integration seemingly opposing but relevant behaviors (Zhang et al., 2015). In the same context (He & Yan, 2022) stated that it is a leadership style that combines the needs of individual employees and organizational requirements, and has a positive impact on the individual level, the team level, and the organization level.

According to (Zhang et al., 2015) paradoxical leadership consists of five types of behaviors as follows:

### **Treating subordinates uniformly while allowing individualization**

The basic principle of treating people based on their membership in a social group is that leaders assign subordinates to homogeneous job positions with identical privileges, rights, and statuses without showing favoritism, but this principle may depersonalize and deprive those people of a distinct individual identity (Zhang et al., 2015). Paradoxical leaders can treat all subordinates fairly, equally, and openly, as this unbiased attitude greatly enhances psychological security and flourishing work among leaders and subordinates, which in turn will lead to improving the outstanding performance of the organization as a whole (Dashuai & Bin, 2020). While a leader treats all his followers equally, he must also take into account the individual characteristics of his followers. If a leader treats all followers the same way, ignoring individual differences, followers may be deprived of their unique individual identity, therefore the leader must balance unity of treatment with uniqueness. (Akça & Tuna, 2019: 2977).

### **Combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness**

Structural orientation suggests that leaders are the center of influence, while individualistic orientation suggests that leaders have concerns or respect for others. Concern for others has been described as the moral and most ethical stance, while self-disparagement, arrogance, and lack of concern for others have been described as a sign of narcissism (Zhang et al., 2015). (Akça & Tuna, 2019) point out that if a leader shows only narcissistic traits, his followers will evaluate him negatively. On the other hand, if a leader only shows humility, he may be seen as a nice or humble person but not as a strong enough leader. In sum, the leader's simultaneous display of narcissistic characteristics and humble behaviors and striking a balance between the two represent the main argument for the "combining egocentrism and other centrist" dimension.

### **Maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy**

(Akça & Tuna 2019) indicates that leaders keep the final decision-making under their control while giving their employees the discretion to act independently when performing their roles. What is meant here is that leaders, for example, make their own decisions on important issues, while delegating decision-making authority on less important issues to subordinates. This is also confirmed by (Kim, 2021) by saying that maintaining decision-making authority while granting independence indicates the integration of both contradictions in leadership behavior.

### **Enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility**

The principle of softness and severity represents one example of this type of contradiction, which takes many names, for example control and flexibility (Lewis, 2000, Lewis & Smith, 2011), control and independence (Teldman, 1989), discipline and empowerment (Lewis, 2000), authority and democracy (Lewis, 2000), control and empowerment (Zhang et al, 2015), all of which take two different aspects: control and flexibility in the language of behavior, and control and independence in the language of decision making. (Ouchi, 1978) classified control into two types: behavioral oversight, which focuses on controlling employees' behavior, and output control, which employs authority to control employees' outputs. (Zhang et al, 2015) suggested two types of contradiction, which they called enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility, which is compatible with monitoring behavior, and maintaining decision-making control while allowing independence in a way that is consistent with the requirements of output control, meaning the possibility of the leader obligating employees to fulfill work requirements at the same time as he acknowledges the existence of exceptions, as is the case with simple mistakes and new challenges (Kim, 2021).

### **Maintaining both distance and closeness**

Leaders set vertical structural relationships to determine the distance between them and employees, whether in status, rank, authority, or power. However, adherence to the demands of employees inherently involves reducing differences in status, in conjunction with a level of close personal relationships (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). How the leader's behaviors influence employees and how employees evaluate the behaviors depends on the balance between closeness to the employees and distance between the leader and them. Followers may see distant leaders as more exemplary and attractive (Zhang et al., 2015: 542).

## **2.2 Strategic agility**

It is necessary to understand the meaning of agility in its general framework, its strategic value, and the excellence that the organization can achieve through it in an environment characterized by rapid changes in all its elements. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word "agility" as the ability to move quickly and easily. This definition highlights two important concepts about agility: rapid response and easy adaptation. This concept then moved to the business field to reflect the ability to respond quickly to the initial signals of change while ensuring the efficiency of the work carried out by the organization. The concept of agility was first formulated in 1991 by a group of scientists from the Iaccoca Institute at Lehigh University, who popularized the adoption of agile manufacturing strategies as a way to ensure the competitiveness of American organizations in the emerging digital and global economy.

The term became a very popular tool to address the issue of sustainable growth in rapidly changing and increasingly competitive markets (Audran, 2011). (Bruegger et al., 2014: 41-42) defined agility as the ability to notice an opportunity and make a quick and accurate move using an acceleration force. It refers to an organization's ability to

constantly adapt to changing and uncertain environments, where competitive advantage is often temporary and requires frequent strategic moves. It is particularly important in environments characterized by high competitive intensity, and therefore from a dynamic capability perspective, it can be understood as a basic ability of the organization in dynamic environments (Junni et al., 2015: 5). According to (Omar, 2019) strategic agility consists of three dimensions as follow:

#### **Strategic sensitivity**

Strategic sensitivity means the sharpness of perception, the intensity of awareness and attention, which can be enhanced through the interconnection of a strategic process with a strong external orientation and internal involvement, a high level of tension and attention, and a rich, intense and open internal dialogue . It is the organization's ability to detect changes in the business environment and monitor upcoming threats and opportunities for the organization (Wirahadi & Pasaribu, 2022). It represents the organization's ability to search for applicable information, absorb, understand, and clarify this information by adapting it to the organization's environment, and interpret and analyze this information in a way that can address the challenges facing the organization (Mavengere, 2013). Strategic sensitivity allows organizations to identify opportunities for new business models and also to be sensitive to the timely need to renew and transform their current business models (Doz & Kosonen, 2010).

#### **Strategic response**

Strategic response is an essential factor in ensuring the success and continuity of business organizations, especially in a very unstable environment . (Overby et al 2006) described it as “the organization's physical ability to deal with the threats and opportunities presented quickly and accurately” . According to (Helfat-&-Peteraf, 2003) strategic response can be ensured through dynamic capabilities that focus on development processes, team building, functional relations, and intensive communication as its basic elements. Responsiveness can be described as the result that can be achieved when organizations and organizational relationships are designed in such a way that they are aware of and respond appropriately to the universally legitimate expectations of societies, and thus it refers to a type of organizational behavior (Popescu, 2014). (Kumar & Motwani, 1995) described it as the ability to accelerate activities along a critical path that begins with identifying market needs and ends with the delivery of a customized product. It is the comprehensive response to business challenges of taking advantage of rapidly changing global markets (Vokurka-&-Fliedner, 1998) .

#### **Strategic learning**

Strategic learning as a dynamic ability of the organization is consisting of a set of processes to disseminate, interpret, and implement strategic knowledge. (Farmer & Kohtamäki, 2017) . These processes that take place within the organization involve strategic knowledge acquisition , interpretation , and implementation ( Gupta & Bose , 2019 ). According to (Omar, 2019) strategic learning is the organization's ability to acquire, interpret, transform, and retain information in organizational memory . Strategic learning is a specific learning capability that enables top management teams to continuously integrate organization-level experiences and knowledge into strategies that enable organizations to cope with increasing strategic interruptions and disruptions (Sirén, 2012).

### **3. Data Analysis**

#### **3.1 The reliability of the scale**

Reliability refers to ensuring that the answer is the same if it is repeatedly applied to the same sample at different times. In order to carry out the test, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was adopted, which studies indicate its acceptability with values greater than 0.70 (Chen & Huang, 2007). Carrying out the application of the test, it became clear that the axis of paradoxical leadership behaviors recorded an acceptable reliability coefficient, with a value of (0.917), and the axis of strategic agility, it recorded a reliability coefficient of (0.924), and also for the axis of sustainable organizational performance, the reliability coefficient reached a value of (0.900), and all axes together recorded (0.970). This indicates that all axes gave acceptable results individually and together, as shown in table (1).

Variable	Symbol	Item	Stability
Treat subordinates uniformly while allowing for individual considerations	X1	5	0.703
Combining self-care with care for others	X2	5	0.728
Retaining decision-making authority while granting independence	X3	4	0.779
Imposing and enforcing business requirements while allowing flexibility	X4	4	0.761
Maintaining balanced boundaries in the relationship with employees	X5	4	0.789
Paradoxical leadership behaviors	X	22	0.917
Strategic sensitivity	M1	7	0.803
Strategic response	M2	7	0.824
Strategic learning	M3	7	0.871

Strategic agility	M	21	0.924
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### 3.2 Statistical description of the study variables

#### 3.2.1 Paradoxical leadership behaviors

From table(2) the variable of paradoxical leadership behaviors achieved an overall arithmetic mean of (4.001), standard deviation of (0.505), coefficient variance (12.62%) and relative importance (80.02%), which confirms that paradoxical leadership behaviors have attained a high level of importance based on the responses of the study sample members. The table shows that treating subordinates uniformly while allowing for individual considerations obtained the highest level of importance, while retaining decision-making authority while granting attained the lowest level.

table (2).

Sequence	Items	Mean	S.D	C.V	R.S	Ranking
1	Treat subordinates uniformly while allowing for individual considerations	4.084	0.509	12.46	81.68	1
2	Combining self-care with care for others	4.063	0.621	15.28	81.26	2
3	Retaining decision-making authority while granting independence	3.804	0.707	18.58	76.08	5
4	Imposing and enforcing business requirements while allowing flexibility	4.040	0.531	13.14	80.80	3
5	Maintaining balanced boundaries in the relationship with employees	4.018	0.635	15.80	80.36	4
The general average of paradoxical leadership behaviors		4.001	0.505	12.62	80.02	-

#### 3.2.2 strategic agility

As shown in the table(3), this variable achieved a general arithmetic mean of (4.007) and a standard deviation of (0.510). The coefficient of variation (12.72%) and the relative importance was (80.14%), which confirms that strategic agility has attained a high level of importance based on the responses of the study sample members. The results showed that the dimension of strategic sensitivity attained a high level of relative importance, while strategic learning attained the lowest level of relative importance compared with the other dimensions.

table (3).

Sequence	Items	Mean	S.D	C.V	R.S	Ranking
1	Strategic sensitivity	4.175	0.655	15.68	83.50	1
2	Strategic response	4.021	0.480	11.93	80.42	2
3	Strategic learning	3.827	0.675	17.63	76.54	3
The general average of strategic agility		4.007	0.510	12.72	80.14	-

## 4. Hypothesis's testing

The main hypothesis of the study is that there is a significant effect relationship between Paradoxical leader behaviors and strategic agility.

In order to test the main hypothesis, first we test its sub-hypotheses. The results of table (4) and figure (2) indicate the following:

**4.1. Testing the 1st sub-hypothesis:** There is a significant effect relationship of for treating subordinates uniformly while allowing for individual considerations on strategic agility.

The analytical results indicate that there is a positive effect relationship for (treating subordinates uniformly, while allowing for individual considerations) on strategic agility. The value of the alpha regression constant reached (0.790) and the beta effect factor was (0.788), and this dimension is able to explain (61.8%) of the variance occurring in the strategic agility, which is reflected by the value of the interpretation coefficient (R<sup>2</sup>), and the significance of the model was confirmed by relying on the value of the (F) statistic, which is greater than its tabulated value. In addition, the significance is within the acceptance zone, which is required to be smaller than (0.05). This supports the acceptance of the hypothesis.

**4.2. Testing the 2nd sub-hypothesis:** There is a significant effect relationship for self-interest and concern for others on strategic agility.

Following up on the results of the analysis, it becomes clear that there is a positive effect relationship (combining self-interest and concern for others) on strategic agility. The value of the regression constant alpha reached (1.179) and the effect factor beta (0.696) and the strategic agility dimension can explain (71.8%) of the variance occurring in strategic agility. Dependent, which is reflected in the value of the interpretation coefficient (R<sup>2</sup>). The significance of the model

was confirmed by relying on the value of the (F) statistic, which is greater than its tabulated value. In addition, the significance is within the acceptance zone, which is required to be smaller than (0.05). This supports the acceptance of the hypothesis.

**4.3. Testing the 3rd sub-hypothesis:** There is a significant effect relationship for (retaining decision power while granting independence) on strategic agility.

The results indicate that there is a positive effect relationship for retaining decision authority while granting independence on strategic agility. The value of the regression constant alpha reached (1.869) and the influence factor beta (0.562) and the independent variable is able to explain (60.7%) of the variance occurring in the dependent variable, which It is reflected by the value of the interpretation factor (R<sup>2</sup>). The significance of the model was confirmed by relying on the value of the (F) statistic, which is greater than its tabulated value. In addition, the significance is within the acceptance zone, which is required to be smaller than (0.05). This supports the acceptance of the hypothesis.

**4.4. Testing the 4th sub-hypothesis:** There is a significant effect relationship for (forcing business requirements while allowing flexibility) on strategic agility.

It is clear from following up on the results that there is a positive effect relationship for the variable imposing and enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility in strategic agility. The value of the regression constant alpha reached (1.357) and the effect factor beta (0.656) and the independent variable can explain (46.7%) of the variance occurring in strategic agility. Dependent, which is reflected in the value of the interpretation coefficient (R<sup>2</sup>). The significance of the model was confirmed by relying on the value of the (F) statistic, which is greater than its tabulated value. In addition, the significance is within the acceptance zone, which is required to be smaller than (0.05). This supports the acceptance of the hypothesis.

**4.5. Testing the 5th sub-hypothesis:** There is a significant effect relationship for (maintaining balanced boundaries in the relationship with employees) on strategic agility.

The results of the analysis indicate that there is a positive effect relationship for the variable maintaining balanced boundaries in the relationship with employees on strategic agility. The value of the alpha regression constant reached (1.599) and the beta effect factor (0.598), and the independent variable is able to explain (55.7%) of the variance occurring on strategic agility, which is reflected by the value of the interpretation coefficient (R<sup>2</sup>), and the significance of the model was confirmed by relying on the value of the (F) statistic, which is greater than its tabulated value. In addition, the significance is within the acceptance zone, which is required to be smaller than (0.05). This supports the acceptance of the hypothesis.

Following up on the results of the analysis, it is clear that there is a positive effect of paradoxical leader behaviors on strategic agility. The value of the regression constant alpha reached (0.310) and the effect factor beta (0.924) and this mean paradoxical behaviors at heads departments is able to explain (83.8%) of the variance occurring in the dependent variable that it reflects. The value of the interpretation coefficient (R<sup>2</sup>) and the significance of the model was confirmed based on the value of the (F) statistic, which is greater than its tabulated value, in addition to the significance being within the acceptance zone, which is required to be smaller than (0.05). This supports the acceptance of the main hypothesis.

**Table (4) : Analyzing the impact of Paradoxical leadership behaviors on strategic agility**

Dimensions	Dependent variable	$\alpha$	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	Calculated (F) value	Tabular (F) value	Significance (P)
Treating subordinates uniformly while allowing individualization	strategic agility	0.790	0.788	0.618	197.154	(3.920) (6.851)	0.000
Combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness		1.179	0.696	0.718	310.24		0.000
Maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy		1.869	0.562	0.607	188.494		0.000
Enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility		1.357	0.656	0.467	106.687		0.000
Maintaining both distance and closeness		1.599	0.598	0.557	153.629		0.000
Paradoxical leadership behaviors		0.310	0.924	0.838	432.328		0.000

Figure (2) shows analyzing the impact of Paradoxical leadership behaviors on strategic agility



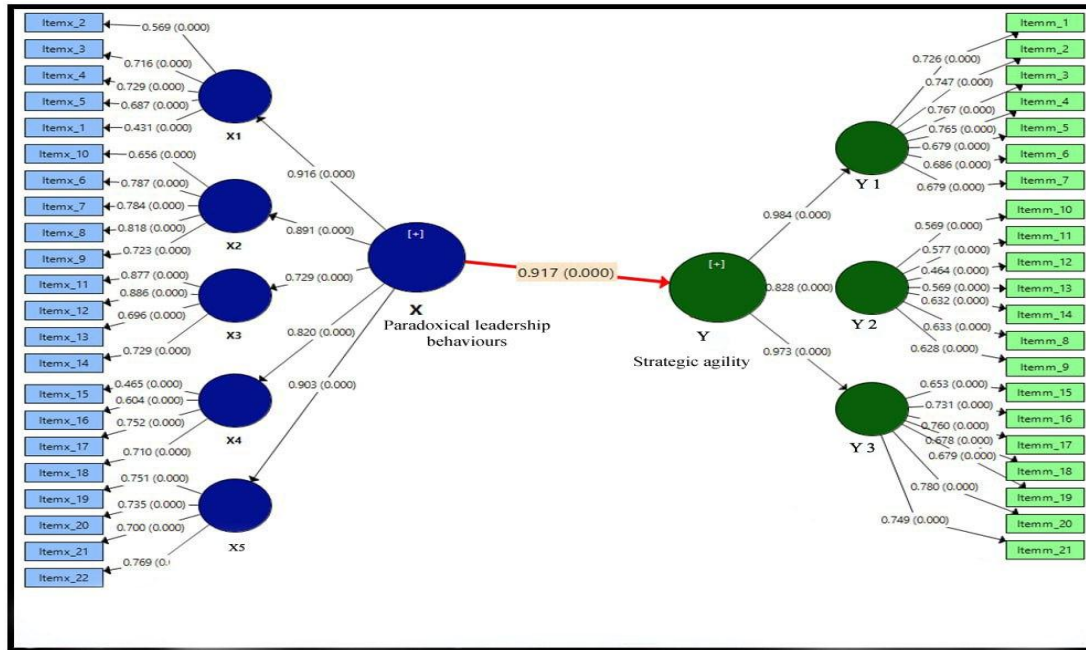


Figure (2)  
Analyzing the impact of Paradoxical leadership behaviours on strategic agility

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusions

1. Through the results of the statistical description of the variable of contradictory leadership behaviors, it was shown that there is a moderate level of the paragraph of retaining decision-making authority while granting independence, which means that subordinates do not have appropriate authority to make decisions in emergency situations.
2. The results of the statistical description of the strategic agility variable showed a moderate level of strategic learning, and this means the need for subordinates to develop and enhance their skills better to achieve goals.
3. The results of the study revealed a low level of enforcement of work requirements among subordinates, which means their lack of commitment to all matters.

### 5.2 Recommendations

1. Drawing the attention of leaders at universities and private colleges to enable faculty members to make some decisions to overcome environmental changes.
2. The necessity of holding seminars, courses and workshops that would develop oneself and advance to a better level towards achieving the desired results in an environment characterized by change and instability.
3. There is a need to use various means that will reduce the distance between leaders and subordinates and try to look at problems and solve them .

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