# Personality, emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and paradoxical leadership behaviors among sport industry leaders: A person-centred approach

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## Abstract

Leaders across the sport industry increasingly operate in environments characterised by complexity, competing demands, and persistent tensions. Paradoxical leadership behaviors (PLB) provide a framework for understanding how leaders navigate such challenges, yet little is known about the individual characteristics associated with these behaviors. Drawing on paradoxical leadership theory, trait theory, and configural theory, this study examined how personality, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility combine to relate to PLB. Survey data were collected from 334 leaders working across sport and sport-adjacent organizations. Latent profile analysis identified four distinct psychological profiles that differed significantly in PLB. Leaders characterised by higher cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness reported the highest levels of PLB, particularly in balancing consistency and flexibility. Findings highlight the value of a person-centred approach to understanding leadership and provide insights for leadership development in complex sport and sport-adjacent environments.


**Keywords:** paradoxical leadership; paradox theory; latent profile analysis

## Introduction

Leadership in sport organizations is inherently complex, requiring leaders to navigate competing demands, diverse stakeholders, and shifting institutional priorities (Ferkins, Shilbury, & O'Boyle, 2018; Kerwin, 2013). Across professional and amateur sport, community organizations, governing bodies, and sport-adjacent industries such as media and marketing, leaders operate under conditions shaped by rapid technological change, commercialisation, heightened public scrutiny, and increasing expectations around governance, athlete welfare, and social responsibility. These pressures place sport leaders in environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), demanding decision-making under uncertainty while managing tensions arising from contradictory yet persistently related demands. A central question for applied sport management research, therefore, concerns what forms of leadership are best suited to navigating these conditions.

Leadership research in sport has offered valuable insights through frameworks such as transformational leadership (Welty Peachey et al., 2015), ethical leadership (Constandt et al., 2018), servant leadership (Burton et al., 2017), authentic leadership (Bandura & Kavussanu, 2018), and, more recently, social identity leadership (Stevens et al., 2021). While these approaches have advanced understanding of leadership effectiveness in sport, they often assume that leadership decisions reflect a prioritisation of one set of values or goals over another (Lee et al., 2023). Such assumptions risk oversimplifying organizational reality (Fischer & Sitkin, 2022) and overlook the fact that leaders working across the broader sport ecosystem, including both sport organizations and sport-adjacent organizations, are routinely required to deal with competing demands simultaneously (e.g., balancing athlete welfare against performance outcomes, commercial objectives against stakeholder expectations). Leadership scholars argue that effectiveness in VUCA environments depends less on

resolving tensions and more on engaging with them through both-and approaches that accept and manage contradiction (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis & Smith, 2022).

Within the broader leadership literature, paradoxical leadership has emerged as a promising framework for understanding how leaders navigate competing yet interdependent demands. Paradoxical leadership refers to seemingly competing, yet interrelated leader behaviors that simultaneously address contradictory expectations rather than choosing between them. Zhang et al. (2015) provide the most widely used operational framework, identifying behaviors that balance control and autonomy, distance and closeness, uniformity and individualisation, and flexibility and consistency. Research outside of sport has found that paradoxical leadership behavior (PLB) is associated with positive outcomes at the individual level, including in-role performance, organizational citizenship behavior, voice, creativity, work engagement, and organizational commitment (Zhang et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2021; Ren & Yang, 2021), at the team level**,** where it is linked to team innovation, creativity, agility, and the capacity to manage differentiation–integration tensions (Mammassis & Schmid, 2018; Backhaus et al., 2022), and at the organizational level, where it has been associated with ambidextrous innovation, long-term performance, and organizational effectiveness (Zhang & Han, 2019).

Despite the potential relevance of paradox to sport organizations, paradoxical leadership has received minimal attention in the sport management literature. While organizational paradox theory has been applied to sport-for-development contexts (e.g., Raw et al., 2022), we are aware of only one study that has explicitly examined paradoxical leadership behavior in sport, and this work focused on coaching rather than organizational leadership per se (Hu et al., 2026). As a result, paradoxical leadership among sport administrators and sport business leaders remains a largely unexplored area, despite the prevalence of paradoxical demands in their roles.

Although existing research highlights the organizational benefits of PLBs, far less is known about the individual-level characteristics that enable leaders to adopt and sustain such behaviors (Ishaq, Bashir, & Khan, 2021; Lee et al., 2023). This gap has important implications for sport leadership practice. Sport organizations routinely appoint leaders into roles that require managing paradox. Yet, leadership selection processes may not consider whether individuals possess the psychological characteristics needed to engage effectively with competing demands. Similarly, leadership development initiatives often emphasise skills, competencies, and behaviors without sufficient attention to the underlying traits that enable leaders to enact PLB under sustained pressure. Understanding the individual-level factors associated with PLB is therefore fundamental to both selecting leaders suited to sport environments and developing leadership capacity within them**.**

~~Evidence from existing research suggests that individual differences in personality, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility may play an important role in enabling paradoxical leadership behaviors.~~ Personality traits such as openness to experience and extraversion have been positively associated with paradoxical leadership, reflecting greater tolerance for ambiguity, cognitive exploration, and behavioral adaptability (Ishaq, Bashir, & Khan, 2021). Emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) has been identified as a critical psychological resource for managing the emotional strain associated with holding competing demands, facilitating self-regulation, perspective-taking, and relational balance—capacities theorised to underpin paradoxical leadership (Waldman & Bowen, 2016; Sadri, 2012). Cognitive flexibility, defined as the capacity to shift perspectives and integrate competing viewpoints (Scott, 1962), has similarly been linked to leaders' ability to manage complexity and organizational ambidexterity in dynamic environments (Kiss et al., 2020; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Collectively, these characteristics point to a set of psychological resources that may predispose leaders to engage in PLB. ~~However, to date, there has not been~~

~~a~~ A comprehensive exploration of these individual differences, in the context of sport or other organizational leadership contexts, remains absent.

~~Critically, these characteristics are unlikely to operate in isolation.~~ Configural perspectives on leadership argue that complex leadership behaviors are best understood as arising from patterns or constellations of traits, rather than from single attributes examined independently (Foti et al., 2012; Zaccaro et al., 2018). From an applied sport management perspective, this suggests that leadership effectiveness in paradoxical environments may depend on particular combinations of personality, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility. A person-centred approach (Woo et al., 2024) therefore offers a theoretically grounded and practically meaningful means of identifying psychological profiles associated with paradoxical leadership behavior, with direct implications for leadership selection, development, and succession planning in sport organizations.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, we identify psychological profiles of sport and sport-adjacent leaders based on personality, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility using a person-centred analytic approach. Second, we examine whether and how these profiles differ in their engagement with paradoxical leadership behaviors. In doing so, this study makes three contributions to applied sport management research. First, it extends the application of paradox theory in sport by examining paradoxical leadership at the organizational leadership level. Second, it integrates multiple psychological constructs into a configural model of paradoxical leadership antecedents. Third, it provides empirically grounded insights to inform leadership selection and development among leaders working ~~across the sport ecosystem, including those~~ in sport ~~organizations~~ and sport-adjacent organizations.

## Methods

### Procedures

Participants were recruited through SportsPro, a ~~United Kingdom–based~~ sports media organization with an international audience across the sport industry. Between November 2023 and January 2024, an online survey hosted on Qualtrics (Provo, Utah, USA) was distributed through SportsPro's email network and social media channels. Eligible participants were employed in sport organizations (e.g., leagues, clubs, governing bodies) or sport-adjacent organizations (e.g., media, broadcasting, technology, marketing, and commercial service providers) and occupied managerial roles with responsibility for at least one direct report. Ethical approval was obtained from XXXX Human Research Ethics Committee (2023/HE002071), and participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

**Measures**

Participants completed a modified version of the Paradoxical Leadership Scale (PLS; Zhang et al., 2015) to assess self-perceived paradoxical leadership behaviors. The original subordinate-report measure was adapted by changing the item stem from "my manager" to "I." The scale assesses five dimensions of paradoxical leadership: uniformity/individualisation (ω = .84), self-/other-centredness (ω = .63), control/autonomy (ω = .73), consistency/flexibility (ω = .67), and distance/closeness (ω = .86). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Furthermore, while the self-reported Paradoxical Leadership Scale has been validated in this sample (XXXXXX, 2025), several of the subscales including self-/other-centredness and consistency/flexibility had sub-optimal reliability, therefore, differences in subscale scores among these subscales across the identified latent profiles need to be interpreted with some caution.. Average scores were calculated for each dimension and an overall PLB score (ω = .80).

Personality was assessed using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003), which measures the five-factor model dimensions of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness.

Cognitive flexibility was assessed using the Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI; Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). Scores were calculated for the alternatives (ω = .90) and control (ω = .98) subscales.

Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT; Schutte et al., 1998). A total emotional intelligence score was calculated (ω = .86).

Participants also reported ~~demographic and occupational information, including~~ age, gender, years in their current role, managerial level, geographic region, and organization type.

**Statistical Analysis**

A person-centred analytic approach was used to identify groups of leaders sharing similar patterns of personality, cognitive flexibility, and emotional intelligence. Specifically, latent profile analysis (LPA) was conducted to derive empirically based leader profiles from these indicators (Morin et al., 2018). Prior to analysis, data were screened for multivariate outliers by calculating each participant's distance from the centroid across all indicator variables, resulting in the removal of 11 cases.

To determine the optimal number of profiles, a series of models with increasing numbers of classes was estimated (Nylund et al., 2007). Model fit was evaluated using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), sample-size adjusted BIC (SSBIC), bootstrap likelihood ratio test (BLRT), entropy, profile size, and theoretical interpretability (Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018). Because the sample size was moderate and profile sizes were uneven,

particular attention was given to the SSBIC, which may outperform the BIC under such conditions (Nylund et al., 2007).

~~Following profile identification,~~ Differences in overall paradoxical leadership behavior and its subdimensions were examined using Vermunt's (2010) manual three-step approach, which allows distal outcomes to be compared across profiles while preserving the original profile solution (Nylund-Gibson et al., 2019). All analyses were conducted in Mplus Version 8.4.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

A total of 334 participants had valid data ~~and were included in the analysis~~. ~~The~~ Participants' average age was 47.00 years old (SD = 11.55), and the majority ~~of these participants~~ were men (n = 253, 75.7%) and worked in upper management (n = 208, 62.5%). Most participants worked for organizations based in Europe (n = 201, 60.2%) followed by North America (n = 66, 19.8%), Australia/New Zealand (n = 30, 9.0%), Asia (n = 23, 6.9%), Africa (n = 11, 3.3%) and South America (n = 3, 0.9%). Most participants worked in sport-adjacent organizations (~~e.g., media/broadcasters, technology providers, agencies;~~ n = 267, 79.9%) compared to those working for sporting organizations (~~i.e., clubs, governing bodies, leagues,~~ n = 59, 17.7%). Participant demographics are displayed in Table 1. Importantly, there were no differences in paradoxical leadership behaviours across demographics; regardless of industry (sport versus sport-adjacent), average PLB scores were not statistically significant across groupings.

**Table 1** *Participant Demographics*

| Variable | n (%) | PLB M (95% CI) | Difference in PLBs p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age M (SD) | 47.03 (11.55) | r = -0.01 | .810 |
| Gender | | | .224 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Man | 253 (75.7%) | 4.57 (4.50, 4.63) | |
| Woman | 80 (24.0%) | 4.65 (4.55, 4.75) | |
| Not reported | 1 (0.3%) | - | |
| Years' experience in current role M (SD) | 7.00 (7.73) | r = 0.04 | .485 |
| Managerial level | | | .126 |
| Upper | 208 (62.3%) | 4.55 (4.48, 4.63) | |
| Middle/Lower | 125 (37.4%) | 4.64 (4.56, 4.71) | |
| Not reported | 1 (0.3%) | - | |
| Geographic region | | | .342 |
| Europe | 197 (59.0%) | 4.55 (4.48, 4.82) | |
| North America | 66 (19.8%) | 4.63 (4.53, 4.72) | |
| Australia/New Zealand | 30 (9.0%) | 4.63 (4.45, 4.82) | |
| Asia/Middle East | 23 (6.9%) | 4.65 (4.45, 4.85) | |
| Africa | 11 (3.3%) | 4.44 (3.67, 5.21) | |
| South America/Caribbean | 3 (0.9%) | 4.99 (4.33, 5.64) | |
| Not reported | 4 (1.2%) | - | |
| Type of organization | | | .234 |
| Agency | 68 (20.4%) | 4.49 (4.39, 4.59) | |
| Technology provider | 44 (13.2%) | 4.54 (4.39, 4.70) | |
| Service provider | 42 (12.6%) | 4.71 (4.57, 4.84) | |
| Right holder/content owner/league | 35 (10.5%) | 4.63 (4.46, 4.80) | |
| Federation/governing body | 31 (9.3%) | 4.53 (4.27, 4.79) | |
| Broadcaster | 32 (9.6%) | 4.55 (4.39, 4.71) | |
| Club/team | 25 (7.5%) | 4.69 (4.50, 4.88) | |
| Media | 16 (4.8%) | 4.42 (4.19, 4.66) | |
| Brand/sponsor | 7 (2.1%) | 4.48 (4.08, 4.88) | |
| Other | 33 (9.9%) | 4.73 (4.53, 4.91) | |
| Not reported | 1 (0.3%) | - | |

**Latent Profile Analysis**

The model fit statistics for the latent profile analysis ~~with increasing numbers of profiles is~~ are displayed in Table 2. Apart from the BIC value, all other indicators demonstrated improving model fit with an increasing number of profiles. When estimating the five-profile solution, a small profile with only 6.9% of participants was identified. The results from latent profile analysis may not be reliable in the presence of small profiles, therefore, the four-profile solution was chosen as the optimal model to explain the observed data. The z-scores for indicator variables for each profile are displayed in Table 3. Profile 1 was characterised by significantly below average cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, agreeableness, emotional stability, and openness to new experiences, and significantly above average conscientiousness. Profile 2 is characterised by significantly below average conscientiousness and emotional stability. Profile 3 is characterised by significantly above

average cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to new experiences. Finally, profile 4 was characterised relatively average scores across all indicator variables.

**Table 2** *Model Fit Statistics For Latent Profile Analysis*

| Model | Log Likelihood | BIC | SSBIC | BLRT | Entropy | Smallest Profile |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 classes | -3554.38 | 7254.04 | 7174.74 | <.001 | .663 | 44.9% |
| 3 classes | -3507.36 | 7212.31 | 7104.45 | <.001 | .759 | 19.4% |
| 4 classes | -3481.52 | 7212.91 | 7076.51 | <.001 | .740 | 16.7% |
| 5 classes | -3458.89 | 7219.95 | 7055.00 | <.001 | .773 | 6.9% |

Differences in demographic and organizational characteristics between the identified latent profiles is displayed in Table 4. There was significant differences in participants age between the identified latent profiles ($x^2$ (3) = 48.52, p = .001), with participants in Profile 1 significantly younger than participants in profiles 3 and 4, and participants in Profile 2 younger than participants in Profile 4. There was also significant difference in the geographical region that participants resided across latent profiles ($x^2$ (15) = 104.53, p < .001), with participants in Profile 1 significantly more likely to reside in Europe and less likely to reside in North America compared to the remaining profiles.

Differences in paradoxical leadership behaviors among the identified profiles are displayed in Table 5. ~~Results demonstrated that~~ There were significant differences in the degree to which leaders from different profiles engage in paradoxical leadership behaviors relating to uniformity and individualization ($x^2$ (3) = 8.07, p = .045), being controlling while allowing autonomy ($x^2$ (3) = 11.69, p = .009), being consistent and flexible in work requirements ($x^2$ (3) = 49.15, p < .001), and in overall paradoxical leadership behaviors ($x^2$ (3) = 23.48, p < .001). Comparing individual profiles, participants in the profile characterised

by above average cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence (Profile 3) engaged in paradoxical leadership behaviors relating to uniformity and individualization significantly more often compared to participants in the profile characterised by below average cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence (Profile 1; d = 0.41, p = .018). Participants in Profile 3 engaged in significantly more paradoxical leadership behaviors related to being in control while allowing autonomy compared to participants in Profile 1 (d = 0.45, p = .006), participants in the profile characterised by below average conscientiousness and emotional stability (Profile 2, d = 0.38, p = .013), and participants in the profile with average scores across all indicators (Profile 4, d = 0.38, p = .006). Participants in Profile 1 engaged in significantly fewer paradoxical leadership behaviors related to being consistent and flexible in work requirements compared to all other profiles ($-1.09 \geq d \geq -0.48$, $p \leq .001$). Additionally, participants in Profile 3 engaged in paradoxical leadership behaviors related to being consistent and flexible in work requirements significantly more commonly compared to participants in Profile 2 (d = 0.49, p < .001) and participants in Profile 4 (d = 0.31, p = .002). Participants in Profile 1 also engaged in significantly fewer overall paradoxical leadership behaviors compared to all other profiles ($-0.80 \geq d \geq -0.26$, $p \leq .040$). Additionally, participants in Profile 3 engaged in more overall paradoxical leadership compared to participants in Profile 2 (d = 0.52, p = .002) and participants in Profile 4 (d = 0.40, p = .004).

**Table 3** *Z-scores for Indicator Variables for each identified Latent Profile*

| | **Profile 1** **n = 63** | **Profile 2** **n = 62** | **Profile 3** **n = 53** | **Profile 4** **n = 156** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CFI – Alternatives | -0.88 (-1.27, -0.50) | -0.17 (-0.41, 0.07) | 1.02 (0.80, 1.23) | 0.14 (-0.11, 0.40) |
| CFI – Control | -0.66 (-0.99, -0.34) | -0.42 (-0.69, -0.15) | 0.70 (0.48, 0.93) | 0.33 (0.09, 0.56) |
| Emotional intelligence | -0.83 (-1.21, -0.45) | -0.06 (-0.29, 0.17) | 1.21 (0.65, 1.76) | -0.07 (-0.28, 0.14) |
| Extraversion | -0.16 (-0.58, 0.26) | 0.15 (-0.10, 0.40) | 0.15 (-0.19, 0.50) | -0.04 (-0.26, 0.18) |
| Agreeableness | -0.35 (0.63, -0.08) | -0.05 (-0.31, 0.22) | 0.83 (0.53, 1.13) | -0.08 (-0.36, 0.19) |
| Conscientiousness | 0.26 (0.07, 0.45) | -1.46 (-1.70, -1.22) | 0.72 (0.58, 0.85) | 0.35 (0.19, 0.51) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Emotional stability | -0.49 (-0.86, -0.11) | -0.47 (-0.75, -0.18) | 0.56 (0.30, 0.83) | 0.24 (-0.01, 0.50) |
| Openness to new experiences | -0.70 (-1.17, -0.22) | 0.14 (-0.09, 0.36) | 0.64 (0.40, 0.88) | 0.09 (-0.16, 0.34) |

**Table 4** *Differences in Demographic and Organizational Characteristics between Latent Profiles*

| | Profile 1 | Profile 2 | Profile 3 | Profile 4 | Overall difference |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | | | | .304 |
| Man | 68.9% | 90.5% | 59.5% | 88.7% | |
| Woman | 31.1% | 9.5% | 40.5% | 11.3% | |
| Age M(95%CI) | 41.80 (38.63, 44.97)[a,b] | 44.92 (42.21, 47.64)[c] | 49.89 (45.82, 53.97)[a] | 49.08 (46.82, 51.35)[b,c] | .001 |
| Managerial Level | | | | | .348 |
| Upper | 50.5% | 61.1% | 68.4% | 66.2% | |
| Middle/Lower | 49.5% | 38.9% | 31.6% | 33.8% | |
| Organisation Type | | | | | .224 |
| Sporting Organisation | 10.9% | 22.2% | 27.0% | 15.5% | |
| Sport-Adjacent Organisation | 89.1% | 77.8% | 73.0% | 84.5% | |
| Region | | | | | <.001 |
| Europe | 81.5%[a,b,c] | 51.9%[a] | 47.8%[b] | 58.5%[c] | |
| Australia/New Zealand | 12.4% | 12.6% | 6.2% | 7.3% | |
| North America | 0.0% | 20.2% | 32.0% | 23.6% | |
| Asia | 6.1% | 6.5% | 4.3% | 8.5% | |
| Africa | 0.0% | 8.9% | 5.8% | 1.5% | |
| South America | 0.0% | 0.0% | 3.9% | 0.6% | |

**Note.** Values that share a superscripted letter in the same row are significantly different ($p < .05$)

**Table 5** *Differences in Paradoxical Leadership Behavior between identified Latent Profiles*

| | Profile 1 n = 63 | Profile 2 n = 62 | Profile 3 n = 53 | Profile 4 n = 156 | Overall difference |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Uniformity/Individuality | 4.74 (4.39, 5.09) [a] | 4.95 (4.70, 5.20) | 5.28 (4.95, 5.62) [a] | 5.04 (4.78, 5.29) | p = .045 |
| Self-centred/Other-centred | 4.08 (3.72, 4.43) | 4.24 (3.88, 4.59) | 4.57 (4.08, 5.03) | 4.05 (3.74, 4.36) | p = .110 |
| Controlling/Allowing autonomy | 4.35 (4.10, 4.61) [a] | 4.41 (4.14, 4.67) [b] | 4.86 (4.52, 5.21) [a,b,c] | 4.34 (4.12, 4.56) [c] | p = .009 |
| Consistent/Flexible | 4.51 (4.33, 4.69) [a,b,c] | 4.90 (4.68, 5.12) [a,d] | 5.29 (5.11, 5.48) [b,d,e] | 5.01 (4.86, 5.16) [c,e] | p < .001 |
| Distant/Close | 3.75 (3.36, 4.15) | 3.82 (3.38, 4.26) | 3.93 (3.35, 4.51) | 3.83 (3.46, 4.20) | p = .944 |
| Overall PLB | 4.38 (4.23, 4.53) [a,b,c] | 4.55 (4.38, 4.73) [a,d] | 4.92 (4.72, 5.13) [b,d,e] | 4.56 (4.41, 4.70) [c,e] | p <.001 |

**Note.** Values that share a superscripted letter in the same row are significantly different ($p < .05$)

## Discussion

Using latent profile analysis, we identified four psychological profiles, demonstrating that these characteristics co-occur in meaningful configurations rather than operating as isolated predictors. One profile in particular (Profile 3) showed the strongest orientation toward PLB, characterised by comparatively higher CF and EI alongside higher

conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, and openness. Notably, conscientiousness and emotional stability varied independently, rather than aligning into a single “above average” or “below average” profile, consistent with research treating these traits as distinct dimensions within the Five-Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Judge et al., 2013). Overall, the findings support a person-centred view of leadership in which combinations of psychological resources shape leaders’ capacity to enact “both/and” behaviors under sustained tension.

Our results align with broader leadership evidence linking EI and cognitive capabilities to effective leadership and adaptability (Gardner & Stough, 2002; Kiss et al., 2020), but extend prior PLB work by clarifying the role of personality. Ishaq, Bashir, and Khan (2021) argued that agreeableness and conscientiousness may hinder PLB, on the premise that agreeableness fosters conflict avoidance and conscientiousness rigidity (Judge et al., 2013). In contrast, our profile most strongly associated with PLB included higher levels of both traits, suggesting that among leaders in this sample, agreeableness may facilitate trust-building and constructive engagement with competing interests, while conscientiousness may support disciplined execution of flexible strategies (Barrick & Mount, 1991). These characteristics may be particularly valuable in organizational contexts characterized by persistent and relationally charged tensions. In line with Ishaq et al. (2021), however, lower emotional stability appeared detrimental, reinforcing that sustaining paradox requires emotional regulation.

The complex and demanding environments represented within this sample (Raw et al., 2022) may help explain why Profile 3 scored especially highly on the consistent/flexible dimension of PLB. Participants occupied leadership roles across both sport organizations and sport-adjacent organizations, although the specific tensions they encountered likely differed. For example, leaders in sport organizations may be required to balance athlete welfare,

competitive performance, community expectations, and governance requirements, whereas leaders in sport-adjacent organizations may need to reconcile client demands, commercial objectives, technological innovation, and evolving stakeholder expectations. In both contexts, leaders are often required to uphold standards while adapting rapidly to changing constraints and competing priorities (Hindman et al., 2021). More broadly, the four profiles identified in this study underscore the importance of considering constellations of interacting traits and skills when predicting effective leadership behaviors in specific contexts (Judge et al., 2002). Rather than leadership being defined by any single attribute, these findings suggest that leadership emerges from dynamic combinations of traits that interact with contextual demands to produce behaviors that are fit for purpose within a given environment.

**Practical Implications**

Although the cross-sectional design of this study precludes conclusions about causality or the effectiveness of specific interventions, the findings suggest several implications for leadership practice across the sport ecosystem. Rather than using personality, cognitive flexibility (CF), or emotional intelligence (EI) as standalone selection criteria, organizations may consider these attributes alongside experience, expertise, and demonstrated leadership capability when evaluating leadership potential. In practice, this may involve incorporating behavioural interviews, leadership simulations, or assessment-centre exercises that require candidates to respond to competing stakeholder demands and organizational tensions.

The profiles identified in this study may also inform leadership development initiatives aimed at strengthening capacities associated with paradox navigation. Consistent with relational perspectives of leadership (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Waldman & Bowen, 2016), development efforts may benefit from emphasizing dialogue, feedback, and shared sensemaking processes. Examples include scenario-based leadership exercises focused on

tensions between performance, athlete welfare, commercial, and community objectives, cross-functional project teams that bring together leaders from different organizational areas, and facilitated reflection sessions focused on complex stakeholder decisions. Such activities may help leaders develop the capacity to engage constructively with competing demands and perspectives.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Key limitations include the cross-sectional design, reliance on self-report measures, and the need to replicate profiles in new samples and settings (Morin et al., 2018; Howard & Hoffman, 2018). Of particular importance, the Paradoxical Leadership Scale was adapted from its original subordinate-report format to a self-report format. Consequently, the present findings should be interpreted as reflecting leaders' perceptions of their own paradoxical leadership behaviors rather than follower-experienced paradoxical leadership. While such self-perceptions are meaningful and may influence leadership identity, intentions, and behavior, they may also be affected by social desirability and self-enhancement biases. Future research should employ multisource designs incorporating subordinate ratings and behavioral assessments to determine whether the psychological profiles identified in this study predict paradoxical leadership as experienced by others. Furthermore, while the self-reported Paradoxical Leadership Scale has been validated (XXXXXX, 2025), several of the subscales including self-/other-centredness and consistency/flexibility had sub-optimal reliability, therefore, differences in subscale scores among these subscales across the identified latent profiles need to be interpreted with some caution.

Future research should also test longitudinally whether these psychological profiles predict PLB over time and whether PLB, in turn, predicts performance and innovation outcomes in sport, consistent with evidence from other sectors (Zhang et al., 2015).

Finally, the sample was predominantly male (76%), reflecting the demographic composition of many leadership positions across the sport industry. Future research should examine whether the profiles identified here replicate across more gender-diverse samples and explore potential gender differences in paradoxical leadership behaviors.

**Conclusion**

This study examined how personality, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility combine to shape paradoxical leadership behaviors among leaders working across the sport ecosystem. Using a person-centred approach, four distinct psychological profiles were identified, with leaders characterised by higher levels of cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness demonstrating the strongest engagement in paradoxical leadership behaviors. These findings extend the application of paradox theory to sport leadership and highlight the value of considering configurations of psychological characteristics rather than isolated traits when examining leadership effectiveness. As sport and sport-adjacent organizations continue to operate in increasingly complex and tension-filled environments, understanding the psychological resources associated with paradoxical leadership may help inform future leadership research and practice.

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