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Synergy of Coaching Leadership and ESG Management for Organizational Innovation in SMEs`

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Abstract

In modern management, leadership has become an essential strategy rather than a choice, and interest in coaching leadership is increasing. Additionally, companies face inevitable tasks such as sustainable management and ESG management, which are crucial aspects of corporate social responsibility. This is a global phenomenon, and social value management activities play a significant role in evaluating the worth of modern companies. ESG management is assessed as a decisive indicator for investors' decision-making based on various global guidelines. ESG is an important issue not only for large corporations but also for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The government is actively expanding infrastructure and providing support to enable SMEs to lead ESG management among domestic companies. However, research on the ESG management of SMEs is still insufficient, and existing ESG studies have primarily focused on financial indicators. Therefore, the necessity for empirical studies involving various variables is emphasized. This study analyzed the impact of coaching leadership on organizational innovation behavior and performance in SMEs, mediated by ESG management. According to the analysis, coaching leadership positively influences organizational innovation behavior and performance by promoting ESG management in SMEs. The findings indicate that coaching leadership has a positive impact on organizational innovation behavior and performance, while persuasion and participation of internal members are essential for success. Moreover, this study provides practical and policy implications, offering specific strategies for SMEs to effectively implement ESG management and ensure sustainability, thereby supporting long-term growth.

Keywords : ESG Management, Coaching Leadership, Organizational Innovation Behavior, Organizational Performance

JEL Classification Code :

1. Introduction

ESG (Environment, Social, and Governance) is emerging as the most important issue in corporate management. As companies expand their socially required roles, social value management activities such as sustainable management and ESG management have become unavoidable on a global scale. For modern companies, ESG management activities play a key role in evaluating a company's value (Korea Corporate Governance Service, 2020; Kim et al., 2021), and ESG has gained worldwide prominence. The UN's Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) in 2006 marked a decisive moment. Since the PRI's establishment, the number of signatory organizations has increased from 63 to 3000 by 2022, and ESG evaluation has become a crucial criterion for investor decision-making (Park et al., 2022). ESG has now become the standard for global leaders, especially as Larry Fink, chairman of BlackRock, the largest asset manager, emphasized the disclosure of carbon emissions and declared he would stop investing in companies' passive about ESG disclosures.

Recently, companies are racing to declare ESG management as a top priority. For many, ESG management is no longer optional but essential, with growing interest particularly among companies that must operate with a long-term perspective. Companies need to secure sustainability from an existential standpoint because they manage relatively large assets, and government ESG regulations have a stronger impact on business activities than in other industries. Additionally, interest in ESG management is particularly high because consumers' favorable attitudes towards social responsibility and organizational innovation behavior are directly linked to financial returns, such as profitability. This has become a core framework for evaluating corporate sustainability.

In general, most ESG research has focused on large or public enterprises (Zecchini, 2016). For SMEs, increasing ESG management has often been viewed as a cost, presenting significant economic, physical, and psychological burdens, and research is just beginning (Yoon et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to analyze the impact of coaching leadership on ESG management, organizational performance, and organizational innovation behavior in SMEs and to propose practical measures. Through this, SMEs can develop specific strategies to enhance ESG management and achieve long-term sustainable management.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Coaching Leadership

Coaching leadership refers to supervisory work that identifies and exploits an employee's potential, develops their abilities, and facilitates their learning. It aims to enhance the performance of both the subordinate and the organization as a whole (Yuan et al., 2019). Coaching leadership is a combination of cognition, attitudes, and behavior; coaching leaders respect their employees' skills and knowledge, viewing them as capable and able to develop further (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). Coaching leaders influence their subordinates' feelings and attitudes at work through encouragement, guidance, facilitation, and inspiration (Ellinger, 2013). They also empower their employees to take on independent and responsible work roles, with their leadership behavior centered on soliciting input rather than providing ready-made solutions and answers. They are good listeners and possess strong analytical skills. Consequently, coaching leaders are able to identify the needs of their subordinates and encourage them to recognize and utilize their strengths at work (Batson & Yoder, 2012).

2.2. Organizational Innovation

One of the most significant characteristics of modern companies is "Innovativeness" (Moroni & Arruda, 2020). Despite limited resources and capabilities, companies secure a competitive advantage through rapid decision-making and innovation, supported by a technology-oriented culture and flexible organizational structure. A company's competitive edge ultimately stems from the 'Innovative Behavior' of its individual members (Palazzeschi et al., 2018). Innovative behavior is defined as the process of generating, disseminating, and implementing ideas (Yuan & Woodman, 2010). It involves expanding and experimenting with non-continuous or unrelated ideas to make them applicable (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). This is crucial as a prerequisite for the survival of temporary organizations aiming to expand business models through customer validation, as proposed by Blank & Dorf (2020). The influence and innovative behavior of organization members drive organizational tasks by creatively combining resources and conducting idea experimentation and diffusion (Lukes & Stephan, 2017). Since repeated experiments and hypothesis testing are required in product/service development, organizational innovation behavior is an essential task attitude for corporate members.

2.3. ESG management

According to a study on the existing ESG concept, the main definition of ESG in this study is that companies improve economic behavior in terms of environmental, social, and corporate governance, establish a good social image, and secure strategic resources necessary for the development of the company to achieve the goal of sustainable development (Stevenson & Jarillo, 2007). Specifically, it is important to improve economic behavior, build a good social image, and secure strategic resources for the development of the company (Stoian & Gilman, 2017). ESG is important in that economic behavior in terms of environmental, social and corporate governance should be improved to create a good social image and to build strategic resources for corporate development.

2.4. Organizational performance

Organizational performance measures the effectiveness of an organization's activities, departments, and members in achieving predetermined goals, standards, and benchmarks (Zudia & Nasir, 2010). Hasibuan defines it as the accomplishments of organizational members based on their abilities, experience, and time management skills. Measuring performance is crucial for motivating members to meet organizational targets. Performance measurement systems connect organizational learning and improvement, using financial and non-financial metrics to track performance. These systems serve diagnostic and interactive roles, aiding strategic implementation and fostering organizational communication. Diagnostic use evaluates business managers' performance, while interactive use anticipates future needs and promotes effective communication (Zhang & Yu, 2020). Owais & Kiss (2020) highlight that performance measurement provides feedback on strategic goal fulfillment, enhancing efficiency and quality. Organizational performance assesses the outcomes of an organization's activities, serving as a benchmark for achieving organizational goals. Effective performance measurement identifies areas for improvement and aligns with strategic objectives (Fitriah, 2023). Key factors influencing organizational performance include individual characteristics, psychological factors, and organizational aspects such as leadership, job design, and reward systems (Pratiwi & Sinaga, 2014). Non-financial indicators also play a critical role in assessing long-term success and aligning with the organization's vision and mission. Understanding these factors is essential for developing strategies to enhance organizational performance.

3. Research Model and Hypothesis

3.1. Establishment of research model

ESG management primarily involves communication with external stakeholders, but the understanding of internal employees also plays a crucial role. The more employees are aware of ESG management, the more positively they respond to and actively support the company's innovative activities. Only when employees fully understand and empathize with the company's ESG strategy and vision can ESG management lead to tangible outcomes. To achieve this, companies strive to enhance employees' awareness of ESG management by developing authentic environmental narratives beyond simple eco-friendly actions. Ultimately, increasing employees' awareness of ESG management can be linked to improved organizational performance. This is particularly relevant for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited physical and human resources, as coaching leadership can foster employees' understanding and support of ESG management. Coaching leaders can induce voluntary innovative behavior by continuously sharing the meaning, importance, and vision of ESG with members and building consensus. Therefore, this study empirically analyzes the impact of coaching leadership in SMEs on ESG management, organizational performance, and the innovative behavior of employees by establishing the following research model.

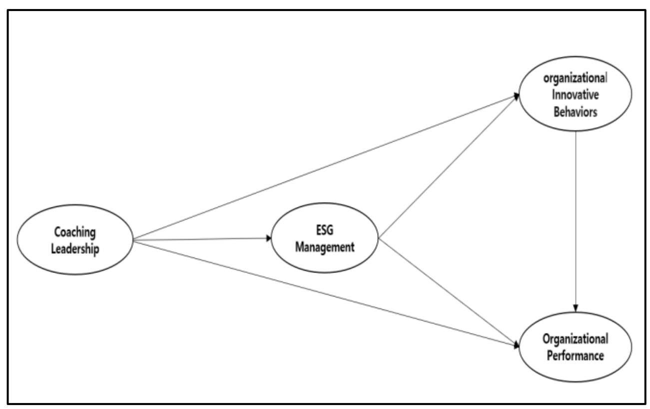

Figure 1: Research Model

3.2. Establishment of Hypothesis

3.2.1. Relationship between coaching leadership and organizational innovation behavior

The legitimacy of a company's efforts to promote organizational innovation behavior is recognized, and the stronger these efforts, the more positively they are evaluated. When companies and their members actively strive to enhance organizational innovation behavior, members perceive authenticity in these activities, leading to intrinsic motivation to improve work performance (Stuart & Abetti, 1987). This has been proven in numerous studies; when members perceive their company as fulfilling legal, ethical, economic, and social responsibilities, their trust and perception of authenticity in corporate activities increase (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Many researchers have demonstrated the positive impact of coaching leadership on organizational innovation behavior. For instance, Seo et al. (2020) found that leaders' coaching behavior promotes subordinates' innovative behavior. Kang & Kim (2013) also reported that coaching leadership fosters members' creative innovation behavior. According to Zhou (1998) and Zhou & Shalley (2003), feedback through leaders' coaching directly affects subordinates' work performance and creative innovation behavior. Studies by Ha & Tak (2012), and Park (2018) confirmed that leaders' coaching leadership significantly positively influences subordinates' innovative behavior. Tak & Cho (2011), and Greene & Grant (2003) explained that coaching leadership facilitates the expression of voluntary innovative behavior. Zhang (2020) demonstrated that coaching leadership effectively enhances innovative behavior, and Lee & Lim (2019) found that the sub-dimensions of coaching leadership positively influence the innovative behavior of personnel. Based on these studies, the following hypothesis was established:

H1: Coaching leadership will have a positive effect on organizational innovation behavior.

3.2.2. Relationship between coaching leadership and organizational innovation behavior

Coaching leadership exercised by organizational leaders can strengthen a company's ESG management activities and alleviate conflicts among its members (Ullmann, 1985). Through leadership, the organization solidifies its identity and symbolism, contributing to members' positive awareness of the company's ESG management (Yilmaz, 2002). Furthermore, leadership plays a crucial role in discovering new opportunities and driving innovation in existing business models during ESG management and value creation (Bezamat & Schwartner, 2022). Previous studies have shown that the leadership capabilities of top executives are key variables affecting overall ESG activities (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005), and the positive effects of ESG activities can be amplified when strong transformational leadership is demonstrated (Cho, & Ann, 2022). A recent study by Yoon et al. (2023) found that "Accountability," among the sub-factors of coaching leadership, positively impacts all areas of ESG: environment, social responsibility, and governance. Specifically, it was confirmed that coaching leadership's influence on ESG management was greatest in the order of social responsibility, environment, and governance. Based on these studies, the following hypothesis was established:

H2: Coaching leadership will have a positive impact on ESG management.

3.2.3. Relationship between coaching leadership and organizational performance

The leader's coaching behavior enhances the self-efficacy of organization members, which can help improve performance (Arnold, 2000; Srivastava, 2006). Kim et al. (2009) revealed that the coaching skills and abilities of sales managers indirectly affect the performance of salespeople. Additionally, studies by Agarwal et al. (2006) and Ellinger et al. (2003, 2007) provide empirical evidence that coaching leadership positively influences member performance. The theoretical basis for coaching leadership's positive effect on organizational performance is well-documented. Coaching leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing members' capabilities and motivating them to contribute more within the organization (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Furthermore, coaching leadership can positively impact organizational performance by enabling proactive problem-solving, immediate responsiveness to changing environments, and improving the quality of work life (Cohen et al., 1997). Several empirical studies address the positive impact of coaching leadership on organizational performance. A study by Ellinger et al. (2003) demonstrates that coaching leadership contributes to employee satisfaction and performance improvement. Therefore, coaching leadership is essential for maximizing organizational performance, playing a vital role in improving leader-employee relationships and enhancing performance (Cho, 2016; Kim, 2022). Based on these studies, the following hypothesis was established:

H3: Coaching leadership will have a positive (+) effect on organizational performance.

3.2.4. Relationship between organizational innovation behavior and organizational performance

Organizational innovation behavior can be defined as innovation activity at the individual level. Specifically, it involves individuals voluntarily exploring and creating new ideas and striving to implement them to contribute to organizational development and improvement. A similar concept is task role innovation, which refers to individual-level innovation activities (Deanne & Thomas, 1999). Meanwhile, organizational performance is a multidimensional concept encompassing financial and non-financial aspects, which can be ambiguously defined (Chakravarthy, 1986). Nevertheless, members' organizational innovation behavior is known to reduce individual stress and positively affect organizational performance. Just as consumers respond favorably when they perceive authenticity in a company's marketing activities, members also react positively to their organizations when they perceive innovation in management activities (Zahra, 1993). Members practice behaviors that align with the organization's beliefs and values and demonstrate stable organizational performance even in challenging situations. Empirical studies on organizational innovation behavior confirm that these activities reinforce employees' work orientation (Walter et al., 2006). Based on these studies, the following hypothesis was established:

H4: Organizational innovation behavior will have a positive (+) effect on organizational performance.

3.2.5. Role of ESG management and organizational innovation behavior in the relationship between coaching leadership and organizational performance

Numerous studies have demonstrated that ESG management activities are key variables preceding organizational performance (Bakhshi et al., 2011). Coaching leadership encourages members to actively engage in their roles and responsibilities, which contributes to enhancing organizational performance (Rifai, 2005). As members gain more opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, they perceive increased attention and consideration from management, resulting in higher organizational performance (Deanne & Thomas, 1999).

ESG management also plays a significant role in innovation, improving the level of organizational innovation behavior among members (Park, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2021). According to the theory of appraisal, ESG activities perceived by members foster pride, which enhances organizational commitment and ultimately strengthens innovation behavior (Ng et al., 2019).

Based on these insights and previous studies related to Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4, the following hypothesis was established:

H5: ESG management will have a significant mediating effect in the relationship between coaching leadership and organizational innovation behavior.

H6: ESG management will have a significant mediating effect in the relationship between coaching leadership and organizational performance.

H7: Organizational innovation behavior will have a significant mediating effect in the relationship between coaching leadership and organizational performance.

H8: Organizational innovation behavior will have a significant mediating effect in the relationship between ESG management and organizational performance.

4. Empirical Analysis

4.1. Data Collection Process

To collect data for this study, an online survey was conducted for 15 days from June 15 to June 30, 2024, targeting employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in the Seoul and Gyeonggi areas. A URL containing the survey link was sent to randomly selected employees, resulting in 255 responses. The demographic characteristics of the respondents showed an average tenure of 18.6 years, ranging from 1 to 36 years. By position, the distribution was as follows: 14.9% department managers, 18.8% vice managers, 28.7% managers and deputy managers, and 37.6% general employees.

4.2. Measurement Tools and Questions

In this study, coaching leadership and ESG management were measured as the organizational innovation behavior and organizational performance perceived by members, along with the antecedent variables influencing them. ESG activities comprise various complex indicators, making it difficult to measure all activities directly. Some decisions are made behind closed doors, so measuring the perception of ESG management from the members' perspective is more appropriate. Additionally, the mediating effect of ESG management in the relationship between coaching leadership and organizational performance was examined.

To ensure the content validity of the measurement tool, scales used in previous studies were applied for all variables. Specifically, coaching leadership was measured with "Direction," "Accountability," and "Development" (5 items each), and "Relationship" (7 items) using Stowell's scale. ESG management employed Park's (2022) scales for environmental (6 items), social responsibility (6 items), and governance (6 items). Organizational innovation behavior was measured using Scott and Bruce's (1994) single-dimensional 6-item scale. Organizational performance was divided into financial (5 items) and non-financial (4 items) aspects, based on the scales of Kim & Min (2016) and Park & Shin (2021).

To prevent common method bias during the survey, item statements were reviewed repeatedly, and some items were reverse-coded. All questions were measured on a Likert 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 4 = neutral, 7 = very much).

4.3. Reliability and Validity

Since the variables used in this study measure the constituent concepts of multiple items, a process of item selection and refinement is required as a preliminary step in hypothesis testing. To ensure the internal consistency of the measurement items, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) values were estimated. Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis was performed for both endogenous and exogenous variable groups.

The analysis results showed that all Cronbach's alpha values were 0.9 or higher, and composite reliability values were also 0.9 or higher, exceeding the standard threshold of 0.6. Furthermore, all factors loading values in the confirmatory factor analysis were found to be 0.5 or higher, meeting the standard value and indicating suitability.

Table 1: Discriminant Feasibility Analysis

	CB	**CS**	**OC**	**PE**	**PG**	**PS**	**AU**
CB	0.911	0.886	0.862	0.783	0.741	0.698	0.793
CS	0.848	0.951	0.933	0.804	0.805	0.767	0.811
OC	0.822	0.896	0.918	0.843	0.838	0.858	0.838
PE	0.746	0.773	0.818	0.961	0.816	0.886	0.832
PG	0.711	0.776	0.802	0.783	0.945	0.834	0.802
PS	0.654	0.725	0.805	0.834	0.788	0.931	0.852
AU	0.762	0.785	0.807	0.803	0.775	0.807	0.971

4.4. State Hypothesis Verification

In this study, variables measure the constituent concepts of multiple items, necessitating item selection and refinement as preliminary steps for hypothesis testing. To ensure internal consistency of the measurement items, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) values were estimated. Confirmatory factor analysis was also conducted for both endogenous and exogenous variable groups.

The analysis results indicated that all Cronbach's alpha values were 0.9 or higher, and composite reliability values were also 0.9 or higher, surpassing the standard threshold of 0.6. Additionally, all factors loading values in the confirmatory factor analysis were 0.5 or higher, meeting the criteria and indicating suitability.

The Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis method was used to test the hypotheses. PLS is a multivariate analysis technique employed by researchers to determine causal relationships among a series of constituent variables. It is considered more suitable than a covariance-based structural equation model, especially when prior research is insufficient, or large-scale sample collection is challenging due to population limitations. Given the limited number of workers with sufficient ESG management experience, PLS was deemed appropriate considering the sample size constraints. Hypothesis verification was performed using a total of 500 repetitive bootstrapping samples and simulations. According to the analysis results in <Table 2>, all hypotheses were supported at the significance level ($p<0.05$) except for Hypothesis 3.

Table 2: Verification of Hypothesis

Hypothesis	path coefficient	S.D	*t*-value	*p*-value (*$p < 0.05$)
H1. Coaching Leadership → Organizational Innovation Behavior	0.319	0.120	2.670	0.008*

H2. Coaching Leadership → ESGM	0.338	0.132	2.565	0.011*
H3. Coaching Leadership → Organizational Performance	0.259	0.158	1.640	0.102*
H4. Organizational Innovation Behavior → Organizational Performance	0.808	0.034	24.104	0.000*
H5. Coaching Leadership → ESGM → Organizational Innovation Behavior	0.897	0.026	35.036	0.000*
H6. Coaching Leadership →ESGM→ Organizational Performance	0.823	0.061	13.596	0.000*
H7. Coaching Leadership → Organizational Innovation Behavior → Organizational Performance	0.843 0/847	0.053 0.034	18.484 20.872	0.000* 0.000*
H8. ESGM → Organizational Innovation Behavior → Organizational Performance				

In addition, the mediating effect of ESG management on organizational innovation behavior and organizational performance was verified. To this end, all supported hypotheses were analyzed for mediating effects by bootstrapping, except for Hypothesis 3 (coaching leadership → organizational performance), which has already been rejected in hypothesis verification.

Table 3: Verification of mediating effects

Mediating effect	path coefficient	S.D	*t*-value	*p*-value ($*p < 0.05$)
Mediation 1. Coaching Leadership → ESGM → Organizational Innovation Behavior	0.257	0.102	2.512	0.011*
Mediation 2. Coaching Leadership →ESGM→ Organizational Performance	0.231	0.091	2.521	0.011*
Mediation 3. Coaching Leadership → Organizational Innovation Behavior → Organizational Performance	0.212	0.085	2.457	0.013*
Mediation 4. ESGM → Organizational Innovation Behavior → Organizational Performance	0.272	0.112	2.413	0.015*

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study empirically examined the effect of coaching leadership perceived by SME members on organizational innovation behavior and organizational performance through ESG management. The academic and practical implications are as follows: First, this research extends the literature by investigating the impact of ESG management on SME members. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on large corporations, our findings suggest that ESG management positively influences organizational performance and innovation behavior even at the SME level. Notably, this study corroborates the work of Yoon et al. (2023), indicating that coaching leadership contributes to improving ESG management. Second, this study contributes to practice by providing empirical data to SMEs that are needed to promote ESG management. In the absence of extensive SME research on ESG, a global trend, this study distinguishes itself by empirically analyzing the effectiveness of ESG management using reliable evaluation indicators.

The implications derived from the research results are as follows: First, the study indicates that organizational performance and innovation behavior are enhanced through the promotion of ESG management. While previous research results on the relationship between ESG and management performance were mixed, this study suggests a positive impact relationship. Second, we identified a mediating path where coaching leadership elevates the level of ESG management, ultimately leading to increased organizational performance and innovation. This implies the importance of demonstrating coaching leadership to improve ESG management in SMEs.

5.2. Practical Implications

First, the study suggests that organizational innovation behavior can be enhanced through the exercise of coaching leadership. By increasing members' awareness of ESG management through coaching leadership, it can be accepted as a company's practice of sustainable values rather than mere slogans or one-time events. Consequently, members are likely to have stronger motivation for active participation. Coaching leadership, being a close activity with members, is expected to be particularly effective in building consensus on ESG. Second, it is necessary to promote ESG management from a long-term perspective. A limitation of this study is that long-term effects of ESG were not sufficiently captured due to the use of only short-term data. ESG is essentially a form of sustainable management, and it is challenging to expect short-term results. Therefore, companies should operate ESG with a long-term perspective and design sophisticated evaluation indicators to continuously monitor ESG effects. Third, active investment and effort in coaching leadership are required. Previously, ESG was often perceived as an activity unrelated to employees. However, to foster consensus and participation among members in ESG through coaching leadership, related investments and practical efforts should be made.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study contributes to the understanding of ESG in SMEs, it has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research: First, although focusing on SMEs is a strength of this study, we examined them without distinguishing between various industries and sizes. While this differentiates our work from existing ESG management research centered on large companies, follow-up studies are needed to cover various organizations, considering the trend of ESG spreading across all industries. Comparing and analyzing the effects of ESG management by industry and size would increase the generalizability and practical contribution of the research. Second, the direct impact of ESG management on organizational innovation behavior was not analyzed. In this research, coaching leadership and ESG management were regarded as antecedents influencing organizational innovation behavior. Future research should directly analyze how ESG management activities themselves trigger organizational innovation behavior. Third, the study did not capture the long-term effects of ESG management. This research did not sufficiently verify the sustainable long-term performance of ESG due to the use of only two years of short-term data. Future studies should secure longer-term data to conduct in-depth analyses of the long-term impact of ESG management. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to literature by empirically examining ESG management in SMEs. As ESG continues to gain prominence, future research should reflect this trend and expand the scope of investigation.

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