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## The Role of Shared Leadership and Communication in Promoting Strategic Consensus and Performance

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### ABSTRACT

The current study aims to investigate the effect of strategic consensus among managers on organizational performance, with an emphasis on shared leadership and communications in Iranian knowledge-intensive firms. Since Iran has its unique cultural characteristics with favoring a more authoritarian attribute, and leadership in knowledge-intensive firms has a more shared style, the context of the study is more appealing to such relationships. Data were collected from 115 randomly selected knowledge-intensive firms and analyzed using structural equation modeling by LISREL. Findings show that shared leadership positively influences strategic consensus of the management team, but it does not have a direct effect on performance. Also, communication among managers increases their strategic consensus which in turn positively affects firm performance. The findings act as a guideline for managers and suggest them to broaden the scope and the content of consensus and also for more effective decision-making and improved performance.

### KEYWORDS

Strategic consensus; shared leadership; communication; performance; knowledge-intensive firm

### Introduction

In the strategy formulation and implementation field, a more precise conception of strategic consensus in general and its link to performance, in particular, are critical objectives for researchers (Kellermanns, Walter, Floyd, Lechner, & Shaw, 2011). Researches on the link between strategic consensus and organizational performance presume a positive relationship between them (Walter, Kellermanns, Floyd, Veiga, & Matherne, 2013), though not in every case (e.g., Grinyer & Norburn, 1977). In some cases, consensus does not have a positive impact on the performance of the organization and it may happen because of the lack of discussion and enough effort to solve problems (Schwenk, 1990). Kellermanns, Walter, Lechner, and Floyd (2005) argue that different and controversial findings result from differences in various definitions, research context, and methods. Particularly, considering other variables as antecedents, mediating and/or moderating variables (González-Benito, Aguinis, Boyd, & Suárez-González, 2012) has led to different and sometimes conflicting results. Iran has its own cultural characteristics with more authoritarian attributes (Mackey & Harrop, 1996). Debate and disagreement are not much tolerated (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003) and consensus, even in a superficial manner, seems to be required for decision-making. Indeed, this

has influences on the decision-making processes in organizations. Since, determinants of consensus and its later effect on performance are the most notable thread of research in this subject (González-Benito et al., 2012), it can be an interesting context to conduct related studies. Especially by taking the positive side of the relationship between consensus and performance, the need to work on the factors influencing and promoting it, particularly at a managerial level for strategic issues arise. The management team of an organization can be influenced by the leadership style of top leaders (Peterson, Smith, Martorana, & Owens, 2003), and dynamics of the team are influenced by the leader's actions and sayings (Sperber & Linder, 2018). In Iran, like other countries, leadership in organizations is under the influence of the national culture and associates closely with it (Dastmalchian, Javidan, & Alam, 2001). Excessive privilege and status are granted to those in the position of power (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003) and this manifests itself in the remarkable score of 58 on power distance index (Hofstede, 2015). It can lead to some preferred leadership styles and ways to achieve consensus among managers. Furthermore, there is nation-wide support for knowledge-intensive firms to play a significant role in the economy and cut reliance on oil and gas as the main economic source of income. Knowledge-intensive

context, where knowledge is mainly deployed to provide solutions for customers (Nurmi, 1998), is an appropriate area for locating the theory and practice of modern leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). These firms have an important role in the economy (Ferraz & Pereira, 2017) and because of their unique characteristics, leadership seems to be more distributed in this setting (Alvesson, 2001). Therefore, the strategic implications of their leadership structure and related factors need more elaboration in terms of research projects. This provides a unique setting to conduct research on the strategic consensus, in which national culture favors a more authoritarian leadership style and organizational culture requires a more distributed leadership style. In this research, two not-formerly-explored variables, including shared leadership and communication as antecedents of management team consensus are incorporated in a conceptual model to be studied in Iranian knowledge-intensive firms.

Among various types, shared leadership seems to have a supporting impact on building a common understanding about organizational and environmental factors and later on solutions (Karriker, Madden, & Katell, 2017), and thus, enhances organizational performance (Jansen, George, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2008). In Management team, shared leadership means all the managers in the team take on responsibilities and participate in setting goals (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006) and motivating people to achieve them and also provide support for the group (D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2016).

Besides, communication practices and channels in an organization and its teams contribute to the performance of the team (Marlow, Lacerenza, Paoletti, Burke, & Salas, 2018) and organization (Ocasio, Laamanen, & Vaara, 2018). Communication is the process of exchanging information between two or more team members, which can be either verbal or nonverbal (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). It has influences on some critical processes of teams, like coordination, goal setting and strategy formulation, which are intense in management teams (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). Furthermore, by clarifying ambiguous situations through more information sharing, misunderstandings among team members decrease and a common perception begins to form (Fletcher & Major, 2006). Therefore, it can have a positive impact on forming consensus among team members and the performance of the organization but the effects of team dynamics on its performance interact with the leadership structure of the team (Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006). Despite the undeniable importance of communication for team performance, in situations with shared leadership structures,

several members make decisions, and subsequently, higher levels of communication are required (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014).

The aim of present study is to provide a framework to examine the simultaneous effects of shared leadership and communication on organizational performance, considering their indirect influence through promoting consensus among management team members in knowledge-intensive firms of Iran. As stated earlier, the effect of strategic consensus on performance is conflicting, but its effect is positive, especially when it comes to strategy implementation. In knowledge-intensive firms, the distinction between strategy and operation is more blurred and their strategy emerges from workers (Nurmi, 1998); thus, studying the effect of consensus on the performance of these firms would provide new insights. Furthermore, leadership is more distributed in this context and there is a need to see whether it has an effect on consensus or not. As a result, the contributions of this study can be explained in three main points: first, the conceptual framework in which the four selected variables and their relationships are outlined is a unique and unprecedented framework by which a different understanding of top management team dynamics can be fulfilled. The second contribution of the study is its focus on the top management team on which little studies have been done to explore the effect of its different characteristics like leadership structure, communication and degree of consensus among members on the performance of the organization. Specifically, previous studies mostly concentrate on team performance, and the effect of top management team dynamics and characteristics on organizational performance is studied in the current study. The third contribution is to the context of the study, which is Iranian knowledge-intensive firms. They are attracting researchers' attention because of their unique characteristics and role in the new knowledge-based economy. Therefore, research on their management structure and dynamics at high levels and factors contributing to their performance can provide new implications for both practical and academic aspects. Another aspect of this contribution relates to the limited number of studies in Iran about shared leadership and almost lack of studies about consensus which provides an interesting subject to investigate.

The next section provides a theoretical background on the key constructs of the current study and development of research hypotheses. It will be followed by discussing the methodology of research and then analyzing and testing the research hypotheses. Then, findings are presented followed by managerial implications and direction for future researches.

## The context of the study

The cultural characteristics of Iran are unique and have high authoritarian attributes (Mackey & Harrop, 1996). For decision-making, even an artificial consensus is required and debate and disagreement are not much tolerated (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). Power distance index of Iran is 58 (Hofstede, 2015) which is an indication of a hierarchical society. It means that less powerful members and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally and members of the organizations are more prone to welcome a single powerful leader who makes the decisions. Those who have a position of power are granted with excessive privilege and status (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). On the other hand, knowledge-intensive firms are a unique place for shared leadership, since leadership is more distributed in these organizations (Oliver & Montgomery, 2000). Ambiguity in this setting is considerable because of required professional knowledge for dealing with complex problems, and therefore, assessing processes is difficult; therefore, senior managers have limited power (Alvesson, 2001). Employees have more discretion about making decisions because of their intellectual skills (Oliver & Montgomery, 2000) and therefore leadership is more distributed in this setting. Consequently, it may be worth studying the effect of shared leadership on strategic consensus and performance of the firms in a unique organizational setting, (i.e. knowledge-intensive firms) within a cultural context which has different characteristics.

## Theoretical background

### Strategic consensus

Agreement in an organization, which is referred to as consensus, means having a shared understanding and conclusion among most or all of the managers about organizational priorities. In a high level of agreement, organizational goals and strategic initiatives to achieve these goals would be settled by discussion (Quinn, 1980), and when there is a common understanding of a firm's strategic and long-term goals (i.e., consensus on objectives) and ways to achieve them (i.e., consensus on means) among managers, it can be said that strategic consensus is realized (Aguinis, Edwards, & Bradley, 2017; Dess & Priem, 1995). Likewise, strategic consensus refers to a shared comprehension and commitment about the content and execution of strategies among main shareholders and managers (Ruijgrok, Peck, & Keller, 2006). A related but totally different concept is strategic dissent which is dispersion in ideas and beliefs about strategic preferences and desired

future of the firm (Samba, Van Knippenberg, & Miller, 2018). Wooldridge and Floyd (1989) proposed a division for consensus scope and content. The former refers to the people involved in and the later states exactly what decision makers agree on. Strategic consensus can also be defined through some key aspects: shared understanding, commitment, agreement, and shared perspectives (Edh Mirzaei, Fredriksson, & Winroth, 2016). Some strategic consensus studies that looked at top management teams focused on agreement and strategic commitment as two dimensions of strategic consensus (Ateş, Tarakci, Porck, van Knippenberg, & Groenen, 2018). Although Fredrickson (1983) maintains that consensus should not be limited to supreme members of a company and the scope of the consensus is more important than its degree, research on strategic consensus has focused mostly on top management of the organization as decision makers, because it is seen as the primary constituent of the strategy process (Porck et al., 2018). In fact managers and leaders have a critical role in implementing strategies (Ateş et al., 2018). But there are other studies that concentrate on employee level (e.g. Weller, Süß, Evanschitzky, & von Wangenheim, 2019) or cross-functional level (e.g. Edh Mirzaei et al., 2016; Kusmantini, Haryono, Untoro, & Setiawan, 2018). It worth noting that the conception of cross-functional consensus is different from that at individual organization's members. According to Kusmantini et al. (2018), alignment and fit between strategies of two different functions is consensus, which is different from meaning that we have taken in this paper. At the employee level, consensus happens "when there is agreement among employees" or a "low variance in perceptions about the situation" (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

### Organizational performance

In elements of strategy, like strategic planning or organizational structure, discussion of the organization's performance is one of the important subjects (Schendel & Hofer, 1979). According to upper echelon theory, top managers represent the upper echelons that are critical for a firm's strategic direction and choices that determine overall performance (Schaefer & Guenther, 2016). It is the heart of a firm's survival and in business and management research, it is recognized as a central outcome variable of interest (Singh, Darwish, & Potočnik, 2016). It refers to the performance of a company as compared to its goals and objectives. In addition, it has been defined as the actual outcome of an organization as measured against that organization's intended outputs (Almatrooshi, Singh, & Farouk, 2016).

Ford and Schellenberg (1982) have introduced three approaches for characterizing the organization's performance assessment framework: goal approach, system resource approach, and constituency approach. Goal approach suggests that explicit or implicit goals of an organization that are acceptable to members should be fulfilled very well. System resource approach examines key internal and external factors of an organization necessary for its effectiveness and competitiveness. Eventually, constituency approach defines the performance of an organization only in terms of profitability for both internal and external stakeholders.

### **Shared leadership**

The traditional view of leadership describes it as "the process of influencing others' consensus about things to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (Bass, 1990, adopted from Binci, Cerruti, & Braganza, 2016). Recently, a new paradigm-shared leadership- has emerged in which an organization or team is led by two or more individuals (Sekhar Bhattacharyya & Jha, 2013), and responsibilities among all members of directors are shared (Mihalache, Jansen, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2014). It refers to the state or quality of mutual influence in which team members distribute leadership activities throughout the workgroup, take part in the decision-making process, and when suitable, offer guidelines to each other to achieve group goals (Shane Wood & Fields, 2007). Recent researches emphasized the importance of shared leadership within the group of executives. One result of collaborative leadership in the group of executives is a deeper understanding of group members about different organizational objectives and directions (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007). Another result is that shared leadership is a valuable source of learning for contemporary organizational leaders (Barnes, Humphreys, Oyler, Pane Haden, & Novicevic, 2013) and enables them to understand the need to develop their interpersonal skills (Arnone & Stumpf, 2010). In Iran, there are a few studies about shared leadership. For example, Shirazi and Ghalavandi (2019) in a study about the effect of shared leadership on organizational commitment showed that different factors of this type of leadership are influential on three components of organizational commitment. This study is similar to that of Akbari and Hoshmand Chaijani (2016) which was done on the teaching staff of universities and showed that shared leadership affects both the commitment and productivity of work groups. In another study, Kazemi and Alavi (2017) made their endeavor

to identify factors contributing to shared leadership and found that firm size has a negative relationship with shared leadership. Finally, Esmaeili, Amiri, and Farrokhi (2016) investigated the impact of shared leadership on the effectiveness of work groups. They concluded that shared leadership is a predominant factor in predicting the effectiveness of work groups and this relationship is mediated by knowledge sharing. Therefore, there is a need to understand the effects of shared leadership on some organizational factors properly like the consensus among top management team and the performance of the firm.

### **Communication**

In the definition of communication, two perspectives are presented: the first view is easier and represents communication as an information exchange process, which takes place between the sender and receiver of this information (Deetz, 1994). The second view, which is more comprehensive, defines communication as a mutual process in which information is simultaneously received and transmitted among team members and the flow of information in this process affects the attitudes and behaviors of members (Craig, 1999). Team communication can be evaluated in different aspects, like the degree of clarity of received information by team members (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014), the extent of knowledge sharing (Kessel, Kratzer, & Schultz, 2012) and frequency of communication (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003).

Mintzberg (1973) holds that the core roles of management such as negotiating, monitoring, and disseminating goals are associated directly with their communication skills and other management roles are indirectly influenced by this element. As a result, it can be stated that the basis of an organization's management depends largely on communication between the managers of the organization (Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, & Henwood, 1991).

## **Hypothesis development and conceptual model**

### **Strategic consensus and performance**

Strategic management theorists implicitly pointed out the importance of consensus and its relationship with performance. Porter (1980) emphasized that for implementing strategies, organizations should encourage managers to make firm committed to the goals and draw their support. In reviewing the theoretical foundations of the strategic consensus, it has been proved that from the beginning, many researchers have shown the positive relationship between strategic consensus and performance (e.g.



Aguinis et al., 2017; Guggenberger & Rohlfing-Bastian, 2016; Kellermanns et al., 2005; Mirzaei & Winroth, 2016; Schaefer & Guenther, 2016). Samba et al. (2018) revealed a similar result with a different approach by showing a negative effect of strategic dissent on firm performance. In some cases, the relationship has been shown between consensus and distinct aspects of performance, like innovation performance (e.g. Zhang, Yang, Xu, & Zhu, 2018).

Dess (1987) proposed two hypotheses about strategic consensus: agreement about goals and ways to achieve these goals and their subsequent effect on performance. The results of the research showed that agreement on either goals or methods of achieving these goals is effective in improving the organization's performance, but having simultaneous consensus on goals and competitive strategies does not produce this result. Priem (1990) re-examined this relationship to resolve ambiguities about the consensus-performance relationship. He revealed that in organizations operating within a more stable environment, a high level of consensus improves an organization's performance. Yet, in a less stable environment, greater consensus reduces the organization's performance. Joshi, Kathuria, and Porth (2003) assessed the relationship between the strategic consensus of managers on strategic priorities and organizational performance with the moderating role of managers' responsibility. Their findings showed that unanimity on strategic priorities of the company is influential on the performance of the organization. However, it is important to be cognizant of the distinction between the process of strategy formulation, where too much consensus likely leads to groupthink, which may reduce performance, and the process of strategy implementation, where consensus is crucial for generating coordination and cooperation in the realization of strategic priorities. Bourgeois and Singh (1983) put it in another way by stating that some disagreements on goals would further increase the dynamics of group members and as a result, it can enhance the agreement on methods to achieve those goals. Thus, consensus should be considered as an outcome of the decision process, not as a feature of the group process itself (Kellermanns et al., 2011). With regard to these explanations, our first hypothesis is proposed as follow:

H1: Consensus has a positive effect on the performance of knowledge-intensive firms.

### **Shared leadership and performance**

After the introduction of shared leadership in management literature, many researchers focused on this theory and investigated its relationship with the organization's

performance. Shared leadership in many studies has been proved to have a positive effect on the performance of teams and groups (e.g., S. B. Choi, Kim, & Kang, 2017; D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Grille, Schulte, & Kauffeld, 2015; Han, Lee, Beyerlein, & Kolb, 2018; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Nicolaidis et al., 2014; Sangeetha & Kumaran, 2018). It is a very necessary process at the group level, which leads to positive and constructive suggestions in the group, and consequently, improves the performance of the organization (Hmieleski, Cole, & Baron, 2012). Besides, shared leadership is significantly associated with increased citizenship behaviors (Ong, 2017) and networking behaviors, both of which affect performance (Sweeney, Clarke, & Higgs, 2018).

In studying the effect of shared leadership on performance, several other intervening variables were included to clarify the mechanism of influence and analyzed the impact of some contextual factors. For example, Carson et al. (2007) argued that shared goals among group members, social support, as well as education have an impact on the desirability of sharing leadership in groups, and in turn, on their performance. Mihalache et al. (2014) introduced shared leadership as a significant organizational factor and claimed that cooperative conflict management and decision comprehensiveness play mediating roles in the relationship between shared leadership and performance. Colbert, Barrick, and Bradley (2014) also believe that shared leadership of senior executives has an important role in promoting financial performance and organizational commitment. In some instances, when CEOs share responsibilities, organizational ability to exploit diversity and improve its ambidexterity becomes stronger (García-Granero, Fernández-Mesa, Jansen, & Vega-Jurado, 2018). The higher the level of shared leadership and motivation of managers are, the better the organization's performance and dynamics become. As stated earlier, in knowledge-intensive firms, employees had more latitude in decision-making and leadership is distributed in this setting (Alvesson, 2001; Ferraz & Pereira, 2017). Therefore, it is worth to verify this hypothesis:

H2: Shared leadership positively affects the performance of knowledge-intensive firms.

### **Communication and performance**

Communication among managers enables them to find strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and organizational threats (Berman & West, 2008). On the other hand, poor communication is a major obstacle to interactions and providing verbal assistance. Therefore, developing standard

rules of communication seems to be important for information sharing (Villa, Gonçalves, & Villy Odong, 2017). Communications among managers and even between managers and employees lead to an effective flow of information. As a result, decision making in critical situations becomes easier, and each member of the organization tries to make constructive suggestions (Marx, 2014). The cause lies in internal communication as a pivotal role for both innovations of organization and its performance (Suh, Harrington, & Goodman, 2018).

Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, and Croon (2013) studied communication as a moderator of the relationship between manager-rated and employee-rated HR practices. They found that enhancing constructive relationships between managers and employees increases employees' perception and, as a result, human resource management becomes stronger, which in turn can lead to better-perceived performance and satisfaction. Choi (2017) also, highlighted the role of communication in promoting performance through its interaction with cooperation and coordination. In knowledge-intensive firms where the nature of the work is complex and several people have decision-making authority, the role of communication is more crucial, and thus, we can propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Communication has a positive effect on the performance of knowledge-intensive firms.

### **Shared leadership and strategic consensus**

It is plausible to expect leadership as one of the influential factors on managers' consensus (Priem, 1990). Shared leadership provides the means for managers to focus on organizational priorities rather than mere personal interests. Moreover, it can lead to better managerial perceptions of organizational priorities and enables managers to have a higher organizational commitment and become more active in their group. Therefore, issues and problems can be solved easier than before (Mihalache et al., 2014). It also can empower team members by involving them in the decision-making process and encouraging them to trust and help each other, which positively affects consensus (Sweeney et al., 2018). By sharing leadership responsibilities among members of a group, coordination problems can be reduced; consequently, shared leadership as a dynamic process will lead to more constructive interactions of individuals to achieve goals (Pearce, Conger, & Locke, 2008). Thus, the fourth hypothesis of the research can be stated as:

H4: Shared leadership affects the strategic consensus positively in knowledge-intensive firms

### **Communication and strategic consensus**

Theoretically speaking, if there is a perfect communication among managers at various levels across the organization, there should be no difference in their perception of the importance of competing priorities and goals in their organization (Kathuria, Porth, Kathuria, & Kohli, 2010). Thus, there is a need for firms to focus on effective communication throughout all levels of the firm (Boyer & McDermott, 1999). In addition, good internal communication processes can help cross-functional consensus on objectives (González-Benito et al., 2012). Empirical studies have supported a positive influence of three variables namely planning processes, agreement-seeking behaviors and increased communication on consensus (Camelo, Fernández-Alles, & Hernández, 2010). Pagell and Krause (2002) hypothesized that consensus will be higher in small organizations just because of physical proximity and increased communication. Conversely, as the size of an organization increases, communication among group members typically declines. This, in turn, reduces the level of consensus (Iaquinto & Fredrickson, 1997). Shared leadership leads to the distribution of leadership functions and responsibilities among team members and as a result, multiple leaders emerge. Therefore, in order to prevent duplication and redundancy of efforts and promote coordination, enhanced communication quality and its higher frequency are required (Marlow et al., 2018). In their study on the performance implications of vertical communication and consensus, Rapert, Velliquette, and Garretson (2002) referred to the important roles that frequent communication and shared understandings have in the implementation process of strategies. They also proposed that when vertical communication is frequent, strategic consensus and organizational performance would increase. Therefore, we can hypothesize the following relationship:

H5: Communications relates to consensus positively in knowledge-intensive firms.

Based on the hypotheses proposed and the studies of Tarakci et al. (2014) and Mihalache et al. (2014) our conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

## **Methods**

### **Sample and data collection**

The population of this study includes knowledge-intensive companies located in Iran. Because the

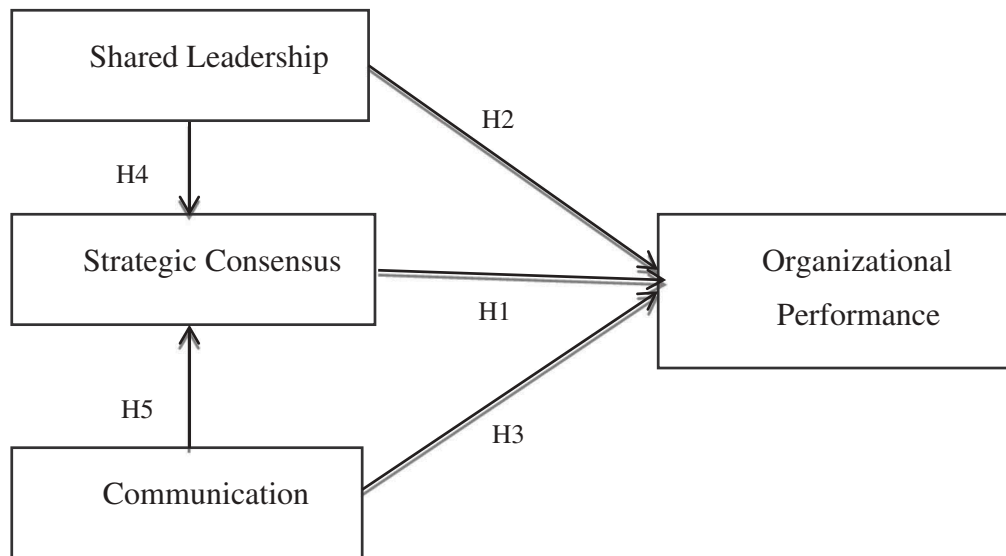


Figure 1. The conceptual model of the research.

number of these companies has increased considerably during the recent years and there is a growing national investment and focus on supporting them, they are opted to be our research context. According to the vice presidency for Science and Technology of Iran, there are 3338 knowledge-intensive firms at the time of data collection. These firms operate in various areas, including advanced machinery and equipment, information and communication technology, electrical, electronic and photonic, advanced chemical materials, and so on. The questionnaires were sent to 520 randomly selected companies via email or direct contact at science and technology parks where they are concentrated. The address and contact details of these firms are available on the website of vice presidency for Science and Technology of Iran. Also, there are specific zones in the country for knowledge-intensive firms where they are located. In these zones, we distributed the questionnaire through direct contact and 132 questionnaires (25.3%) were returned back, from which, 115 ones (22.1%) were complete and useful. In each company, about three questionnaires were distributed among top management team members, and later they were consolidated into one data set for that company by averaging the scores for each item. Table 1 shows the sample characteristics of respondents.

### Variable measurement

To develop proper measures for the research variables, related literature was reviewed and measurement items were adopted and used after modification. Ten items derived from the questionnaire developed by Kellermanns

et al. (2005) measured the strategic consensus. The eight-item scale used to assess shared leadership was adopted from Mihalache et al. (2014) and another eight-item scale for measuring communication was adopted from Rubin (1985). The dependent variable, i.e. organizational performance, was measured using nine items, which were derived from the questionnaire developed by Tracey et al. (2012). The questions were translated to Farsi, which is the official language in Iran to be prepared for distribution. Five professors who were highly specialized in strategic management and leadership and had good knowledge of English to Farsi translation were asked to review and suggest any modification to the content and wording of the translated version of items to make them clear and consistent. After receiving their feedback and comments, the revised questionnaire became ready for further assessments described in the next section. A five-point scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) was used to rate each item by respondents.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

Characteristics (n = 115)	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Industry</b>		
Information and Communication Technology	22	19%
Advanced products and Equipment	34	30%
Medical Equipment	9	8%
Electrical and Computer Hardware	18	16%
Nano-Technology	15	13%
Bio-Medicine	11	10%
Aerospace	6	5%
<b>Years of Activity</b>		
Under 5	18	16%
5–10	54	47%
11–15	18	16%
Over 15	25	22%
<b>Number of Employees</b>		
Under 50	48	42%
50–100	31	27%
Over 100	36	31%



## Results

Descriptive statistics shows the demographics of surveyed firms (Table 1). The demographic questions were the industry type, years of activity, and the number of employees. A two-step approach is used for the statistical analysis of data. At the first step, measurement model evaluation and reliability and validity assessments are done. At the second step, the structural model and path coefficients were analyzed (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). These two consecutive steps are discussed below.

### Reliability, validity of the questionnaire, and structural equation modeling

Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability for all constructs (Table 2) were calculated to examine the reliability of the questionnaire. Since alpha values for all constructs are above 0.7, they can be considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). CR (composite reliability) and AVE (average variance extracted) values met the minimum cut-off value of 0.70 and 0.50 respectively and thus reliability and convergent validity were reached. These values are represented in Table 2. Table 3 shows the correlation between constructs as well as discriminant validity. Discriminant validity is an indicator of

whether the construct is measuring a distinct concept or not (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). It is the comparison of the square root of AVEs of each construct with its correlation with other constructs. For all the constructs, the values on the diagonal (square root of AVEs), is greater than the correlation values below it and discriminant validity is acceptable.

Standardized factor loadings exceed the threshold value of 0.5 and all are significant at  $\alpha = 0.05$ , indicating evidence of convergent validity (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). When the factor loadings are large and closer to one, the observed variable can explain the latent variable well.

Model fit indexes show acceptable values too. The most important index is  $X^2/df$ , and its value is between 1–5 which shows a good fit (Zainudin, 2012). Other model fit indexes in structural equation modeling are illustrated in Table 4. Even though both NFI and NNFI are a little less than suggested 0.9 thresholds, they are above 0.8 and they can be acceptable (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996).

### Hypotheses testing

Using structural equation modeling by LISREL software, hypotheses were tested (Table 5). The results of

**Table 2.** Results of confirmatory factor analysis and reliability of variables.

Variable	Number of questions	Standardized Factor Loadings	t-value	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Strategic Consensus	1	0.88	9.68	0.839	0.939	0.635
	2	0.85	11.18			
	3	0.75	9.33			
	4	0.82	10.55			
	5	0.74	9.11			
	6	0.73	9.04			
	7	0.66	7.81			
	8	0.73	8.89			
	9	0.8	10.24			
	10	0.8	10.22			
Shared Leadership	11	0.75	9.23	0.863	0.946	0.662
	12	0.82	10.59			
	13	0.8	10.28			
	14	0.7	8.49			
	15	0.82	10.61			
	16	0.79	10.1			
	17	0.83	10.78			
	18	0.8	10.23			
Communication	19	0.76	9.53	0.864	0.946	0.688
	20	0.73	8.95			
	21	0.67	8.06			
	22	0.78	9.95			
	23	0.98	13.53			
	24	0.95	13.52			
	25	0.82	10.7			
	26	0.71	8.59			
Organizational Performance	27	0.88	10.88	0.938	0.952	0.690
	28	0.8	10.28			
	29	0.81	10.23			
	30	0.84	11.66			
	31	0.69	8.26			
	32	0.88	11.14			
	33	0.89	12.18			
	34	0.78	9.78			
	35	0.78	9.82			

**Table 3.** Correlations and discriminant validity.

	SA	SL	C	OP
SC	<b>[0.796]</b>			
SL	0.774	<b>[0.813]</b>		
C	0.589	0.591	<b>[0.817]</b>	
OP	0.624	0.547	0.624	<b>[0.830]</b>

SC (Strategic Consensus), SL (Shared Leadership), C (Communication), OP (Organizational Performance).

All correlation coefficients are significant at  $p < .01$

**Table 4.** Model fit indexes.

	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	RMR	NFI	NNFI
Satisfactory level	1–5	>0.9	<0.1	>0.9	>0.9
Model value	3.5	0.9	0.081	0.87	0.89

**Table 5.** Path analysis and results of hypotheses testing.

Research variable relationship	t-value	Path coefficient	result
H1:strategic consensus-performance	2.03	0.85	Confirmed
H2:shared leadership-performance	-1.31	-0.51	Rejected
H3:communication-performance	4.72	0.48	Confirmed
H4:shared leadership-strategic consensus	8.73	0.89	Confirmed
H5:communication-strategic consensus	2.01	0.11	Confirmed

the structural model analysis showed that strategic consensus has a positive and significant effect on performance and t-value (2.03) is greater than 1.96. Also, path coefficient is considerable (0.85); thus, H1 is supported. The results showed that shared leadership does not have a significant impact on performance due to t-value less than 1.96 (-1.31) and H2 is rejected. The positive relationship between communication and performance was proved because of t-value greater than 1.96 (4.72) and the third hypothesis is supported. The effect of shared leadership on strategic consensus was shown to be significant, since again t-value is greater than 1.96 (8.73). Then, our fourth hypothesis is accepted. For H5, t-value is greater than 1.96 (2.01) and we conclude that communication impacts strategic consensus positively and this hypothesis is confirmed.

## Discussion

According to the results of data analysis, the strategic consensus of executives about a company's priorities and actions has a positive impact on the performance of the organization (H1) in knowledge-intensive firms. This result is consistent with some previous studies like Aguinis et al. (2017); Guggenberger and Rohlfs-Bastian (2016); Kellermanns et al. (2005); Mirzaei and Winroth (2016); Schaefer and Guenther (2016). Also, acceptance of this hypothesis is in line with the finding of Kellermanns et al. (2005) and González-Benito et al.

(2012). In knowledge-intensive firms, the nature of the work is not straightforward and because of higher levels of change, having consensus especially on the priorities and ways to implement strategies can contribute to the performance of the firm. The cultural context of the study can play a significant role here. In Iran, acceptance of diversity and conflicts, tolerance to debate or disagreement are not as much as in some other cultures where many of previous studies have been done (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). Thus, people cooperate with each other if they have a common understanding of the issue, solutions, and ways of implementing those solutions.

The results of testing H2 show that shared leadership does not have a significant effect on the performance of the firm. This is a conflicting result since it does not have much support in the literature. One explanation for this can be found in Hoch, Pearce, and Welzel (2010). According to them, when age diversity and coordination are low in teams, the effect of shared leadership on team performance is low as well. Here we speculate about the reason behind the rejection of this hypothesis to be higher diversity in knowledge-intensive firms and weak coordination. Even though shared leadership can contribute to organizational performance in some situations, it only has a positive effect when enough coordination between team members and the organization as a whole exists. Here, the cultural context of the study again can have an effect on the results. Because of the more authoritarian characteristic of Iranian culture and a remarkable power distance in the society (Mackey & Harrop, 1996), historically, the leadership concept is associated with this culture and leader possess charisma even though knowledge-intensive firms have more leadership distribution (Dastmalchian et al., 2001). Those in the position of power are granted with excessive privilege and status (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). As a result, people accept and expect a single leader with more power and are used to work well with this type of leader. The other explanation is the nature of work. Shared leadership works well when there are three characteristics of work (Pearce, 2004): interdependency, creativity, and complexity. In our sample, there may be low levels of these characteristics which can hinder the positive effect of shared leadership on performance and it requires further examinations.

The third hypothesis (H3) which is confirmed, states that communication affects performance positively and this is in line with Choi (2017). In this regard, Berman and West (2008) concluded that communication enables managers to understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the organization.

In communications between managers, mutual unity and support will be reinforced resulting in higher performance levels. Because of the complexity of work in knowledge-intensive firms, the role of communication is more critical and it can contribute to clarifying objectives and roles in decision-making processes, which can enhance performance.

The results for H4 show that there is a meaningful relationship between shared leadership and strategic consensus. It is consistent with other researches, like Karriker et al. (2017). This finding also supports the outcome of Mihalache et al. (2014). Interactions of people within a group can be more constructive because of the dynamic process of shared leadership.

Finally, about H5, the positive relationship between communication and the strategic consensus was proved. This is in line with the finding of Rapert et al. (2002) and González-Benito et al. (2012), Camelo et al. (2010), and Kellermanns et al. (2005). Especially, because the knowledge-intensive firms are usually small to medium organizations, physical proximity leads to more communication and consensus (Pagell & Krause, 2002).

## Conclusion and implications

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of strategic consensus among managers of knowledge-intensive organizations along with shared leadership and communication on organizational performance. In choosing the variables used in the conceptual model, we tried to select those which interact with strategic consensus at higher levels of the organization. Shared leadership and communication in conjunction with strategic consensus have been explicitly or implicitly addressed in relevant research. However, their interaction in the specific way that the conceptual model of this study shows is unique. Furthermore, the cultural and organizational setting of the research, i.e. knowledge-intensive firms in Iran, is another interesting characteristic of the current research.

Based on the study of strategic management literature and the results obtained from the present research, we can propose that in decision-making processes and discussion meetings, taking a shared style of leadership and having more communication among management team members can contribute to the performance of the firm.

The intra-group decision-making processes, need to be improved through increased communication which can lead to more consensus. The results recommend leaders to strengthen interactions in the management

group, since achieving a strategic consensus in such a group would be far easier.

The current study found that strategic consensus and communication are crucial determinants of performance. Thus, it is very important for managers to strengthen them within their organization, especially at the top management team. As a result, top managers should attempt to create certain team conditions to induce agreement-seeking behavior, including generating mutual accountability and allowing team members to shape collectively the strategies and required plans (Knight et al., 1999). Decision-making processes and discussion meetings about strategies, plans, and priorities of the company are influenced by leadership style and communication among team members. Shared leadership in knowledge-intensive firms shown to have a positive impact on forming a consensus, and because consensus influences performance, a more distributed and shared leadership style should be taken by top managers. Consensus needs time and effort to form, but it is important to invest in activities which will lead to higher consensus among members of the top management team, especially when differentiation strategy is pursued by firms (Homburg, Krohmer, & Workman, 1999) or they should try to find ways to implement strategies. Managers also must be fully cognizant of the informal social connectivity in organizations. Social connections can augment communication channels and open dialogue between connected and unconnected groups (Pappas, Flaherty, & Wooldridge, 2003). Third, upper managers should allow functional-level managers to take a role in the strategic planning process. In addition, good internal communication processes is also a critical factor in cross-functional consensus on objectives (González-Benito et al., 2012).

The current research has some theoretical implications. First of all, it provided further evidence to the controversial body of research about the consensus-performance relationship by showing another positive impact in a different setting. As argued by González-Benito et al. (2012), different variables as antecedents or mediators can provide different results for consensus-performance relationship and in this research, shared leadership and communication were introduced as antecedents of consensus, which formerly have not been considered in their current role. The other contribution is related to the cultural and organizational setting of the research. In a unique national culture setting that favors a more authoritarian leadership style, we explored the effect of shared leadership on consensus and performance. Organizational setting of the study which was knowledge-intensive firms is another aspect of the originality of the research. There has not been similar research in

this type of firms. Finally, the focus of the research on top management team in which little studies have been done to explore the effect of its different characteristics like leadership style, communication and degree of consensus among members on the performance of firm is the other theoretical contribution of the study to the literature.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

There are some limitations to the present study. The sample of the study is limited to the top management team. In other words, all the variables are related to this level of management and the study is about the implications of these variables for performance. We know that in strategy implementation, middle and operational levels of the organization have more influence on the success and performance of a firm. The setting of the study also is limited to Iranian knowledge-intensive firms. As discussed earlier, Iran has a more authoritarian culture and power distance index is considerable. On the other hand, in knowledge-intensive firms leadership is more distributed. This provides a unique setting, and therefore, the generalization of the results should be made with caution. Also, some moderating variables like industry characteristics and size of the firm were not included in the research. They have potentials to affect the relationships. The comparatively small sample size of 115 companies can be another limitation. Moreover, in our study knowledge-intensive firms were studied regardless of the industry they were operating in. Since different industries have various strategies and environmental uncertainty and dynamics of some industries can be higher than others, the relationships may differ based on the type of industry. Therefore, it may be worth to group these firms and then conduct the multi-group analysis.

Furthermore, there can be other similar studies in different cultural contexts to compare the findings. Iran has its own special culture that plays a role in leadership and organizational dynamics. Consequently, the results can be different in other settings. There is also some research potentials in knowledge-intensive firms to study qualitatively the formation process of consensus and its dynamics. In addition, because shared leadership did not show a positive impact on performance, there could be other qualitative research schemes to explore the reasons behind this in knowledge-intensive settings. In addition, the power distance index is an appropriate tool to decide on which countries should be the focus of studying. Iran is known to indicate more power distance and thus future studies may be conducted in countries with relatively lower power distance. In addition, testing our hypotheses in other settings such as health care and

service organizations will give more insight on consensus and leadership. Eventually, we focused on shared leadership in our study while future studies may concentrate on different styles of leadership.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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