

Altruistic Leadership and Human-Centered Entrepreneurship: A Mediated Moderation Model

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Abstract: Human - centered entrepreneurship, as a sustainable entrepreneurial paradigm that transcends mere profit orientation to integrate employee development with corporate growth, has emerged as a focal topic in both academic research and practical application. Building upon this concept, the present study shifts from a macro-level structural lens to a micro-level perspective of entrepreneurial leadership, examining how altruistic leadership shapes corporate performance. Grounded in social exchange theory and conservation of resources theory, this study proposes and empirically tests a mediated moderation model to elucidate the relationships among the key variables. Drawing on a case study of Dilu Company, it further employs process tracing and a Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) framework to explore the specific pathways through which altruistic leadership fosters sustainable organizational performance. The findings indicate that altruistic leadership exerts a positive influence on sustainable performance, with organizational trust acting as a mediating factor. Moreover, environmental uncertainty strengthens this relationship, amplifying the positive effect of altruistic leadership in dynamic contexts. Through systematic theoretical deduction and qualitative analysis, this study elucidates the essence of humanistic entrepreneurship from a leadership perspective, highlighting the unique value of altruistic leadership in complex environments and offering actionable insights for entrepreneurs committed to human-centered principles.

Keywords: Humanistic Entrepreneurship; Altruistic Leadership; Organizational Trust; Environmental Uncertainty; Mediated Moderation Model

1. Introduction

Amid the global emphasis on sustainable development, promoting corporate social responsibility and adopting people-oriented management have become prevailing trends. Under the prevailing policy orientation that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship while emphasizing the integration of social and environmental value beyond mere economic profit, startups are entrusted with significant expectations to act as key drivers of employment and innovation. However, in contrast to this vision, empirical observations indicate that the vast majority of new ventures struggle to achieve sustainable long-term development. In today's dynamic and uncertain environment, many struggle to balance short-term survival with sustainable growth. In contrast, leaders with strong altruistic traits—such as Kyocera's Kazuo Inamori, who advocated "altruistic management," and Haidilao's Zhang Yong, who promoted an "employees-first" philosophy—demonstrate remarkable resilience and growth. These examples have sparked academic interest in whether altruistic leadership can integrate human-centered values with business performance.

Existing research has explored the motivations and value of humanistic entrepreneurship at macro and meso levels, but micro-level studies remain limited. In particular, little is known about how external environmental uncertainty moderates the link between altruistic leadership and organizational trust. This gap restricts existing theories from explaining why some altruistic leaders successfully sustain humanistic entrepreneurship in turbulent environments while others do not.

To address this gap, this study develops a mediated moderation model to examine whether and how altruistic leadership promotes sustainable corporate performance through organizational trust, and how environmental

uncertainty moderates this process. Specifically, it investigates two questions:

- (1) Does altruistic leadership enhance sustainable performance-combining economic, social, and environmental dimensions-through the mediating role of organizational trust?
- (2) How does environmental uncertainty moderate the relationship between altruistic leadership and organizational trust, influencing this mediating mechanism?

The findings show that altruistic leadership improves overall performance by fostering organizational trust. Moreover, environmental uncertainty strengthens the positive association between altruistic leadership and organizational trust and amplifies the mediating effect of trust between leadership behavior and entrepreneurial performance.

This study enriches the micro-level understanding of humanistic entrepreneurship by revealing how entrepreneurs sustain organizations through altruistic leadership in adverse contexts. The results also provide theoretical and practical insights for building symbiotic entrepreneurial ecosystems that embody altruistic principles and emphasize ecological sustainability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Evolution and Research Progress of Altruistic Leadership

The study of altruistic leadership emerged from the convergence of social exchange theory and moral leadership theory. Early research primarily focused on how leaders' altruistic behaviors influence employees' attitudes and commitment. For instance, Vondey (2010) demonstrated that altruistic leadership significantly enhances employees' organizational commitment by fostering high-quality social exchange relationships [1]. In recent years, the research focus has expanded from the individual level to the organizational level. Liao et al. (2022), using a multilevel analytical approach, confirmed that altruistic leadership contributes to the formation of an ethical organizational climate, thereby enhancing corporate sustainability performance [2]. Particularly within entrepreneurial contexts, scholars have begun to highlight the distinctive value of altruistic leadership in resource-scarce environments.

2.2 Research on the Mediating Mechanism of Organizational Trust

Organizational trust, as a pivotal variable linking leadership behaviors to organizational outcomes, has developed into a relatively mature theoretical construct. Drawing on leader-member exchange theory, Zheng et al. (2020) identified trust as a core mediating factor between leadership behavior and employee performance [3]. More recent studies have shifted attention toward the dynamic process of trust formation. For example, Liu Jia et al. (2022), through longitudinal analysis, revealed a "trust acceleration" effect of organizational trust during crisis periods [4]. In entrepreneurial settings, Wang et al. (2023) found that the high uncertainty inherent in startups makes the establishment of organizational trust more difficult [5], yet underscores its strategic significance. These findings offer new perspectives on the critical function of trust in entrepreneurial processes.

2.3 Research on the Moderating Effects of Environmental Uncertainty

Considerable progress has been made in examining the moderating effects of environmental uncertainty. Building upon situational strength theory, Meyer et al. (2010) introduced the concept of boundary effects of environmental characteristics on leadership effectiveness [6]. Subsequent research has refined this understanding. For instance, Zhang Min et al. (2021), in a study based on the Chinese context, demonstrated that environmental uncertainty amplifies the influence of transformational leadership on organizational innovation [7]. More recently, scholars have explored the differentiated impacts of various forms of environmental uncertainty. Li Ming et al. (2023) compared the moderating effects of policy versus market uncertainty on leadership effectiveness [8], thereby providing a more nuanced framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of environmental uncertainty.

2.4 Theoretical Development and Research Status of Humanistic Entrepreneurship

The study of humanistic entrepreneurship has evolved from macro-level institutional analyses to micro-level mechanism explorations. Early research by Battilana et al. (2015) focused on the institutional drivers shaping humanistic

entrepreneurship [9], while more recent studies have emphasized the influence of individual entrepreneurial characteristics and leadership behaviors. For example, Zhao et al. (2022) revealed through case analysis that humanistic entrepreneurs' value orientations play a decisive role in shaping strategic decision-making [10]. Concurrently, methodological approaches have advanced from cross-sectional to process-oriented designs. Smith et al. (2019), for instance, employed longitudinal tracking to capture the evolutionary trajectory of humanistic entrepreneurial values throughout organizational development [11], providing a dynamic perspective on sustaining humanistic entrepreneurship.

2.5 Research Review and Theoretical Integration

Despite significant progress, several research gaps remain. First, the mechanisms through which altruistic leadership operates in entrepreneurial contexts have not been fully elucidated, particularly with respect to systematic validation of mediating pathways. Second, the complex role of environmental uncertainty in moderating the relationship between altruistic leadership and humanistic entrepreneurship has not been adequately explored. Finally, there is still a lack of an integrated theoretical framework capable of explaining the dynamic interactions among these variables. To bridge these gaps, this study develops a mediated moderation model that systematically reveals how altruistic leadership influences humanistic entrepreneurship through organizational trust, while considering the boundary effects of environmental uncertainty. This research contributes to advancing the microfoundational understanding of humanistic entrepreneurship.

3. Research Hypotheses and Model Construction

3.1 Research Hypotheses

3.1.1 Altruistic leadership and sustainable corporate performance

Drawing on social exchange theory and the resource-based view, this study examines the mechanisms through which altruistic leadership influences sustainable corporate performance. Altruistic leaders, characterized by selfless concern, moral exemplarity, and long-term value

orientation, promote comprehensive organizational performance across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Tang and Long (year) argued that when employees feel valued and respected, they tend to reciprocate with stronger engagement and higher performance. First, in internal management, altruistic leaders enhance employee well-being and foster a fair working environment, thereby stimulating proactive work engagement and transforming altruistic values into sustainable actions. Second, in external operations, their adherence to moral principles and establishment of effective governance systems contribute to building a positive corporate reputation and stable stakeholder relationships. Finally, at the strategic level, altruistic leaders prioritize long-term value creation over short-term profits, guiding the firm toward innovations that generate both social and environmental benefits. Based on the above reasoning, altruistic leadership enhances sustainable corporate performance through improved internal management, strengthened external relations, and a long-term strategic orientation.

Hence, this study proposes: H1: Altruistic leadership has a significant positive effect on sustainable corporate performance [12].

3.1.2 The mediating role of organizational trust
Beyond its direct effect, altruistic leadership can also influence sustainable performance through organizational trust. According to leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, leaders' caring behaviors act as strong trust signals for employees. Such behaviors are often interpreted as genuine and collectively oriented, prompting employees to respond with higher trust and greater effort. As the Analects state, "Without trust, the people cannot stand." In modern organizational contexts, heightened trust effectively reduces internal transaction and supervision costs while encouraging employees to contribute voluntarily to shared organizational goals.

When trust prevails within the organization, employees are more inclined to embrace the firm's humanistic vision and sustainability strategies. Their organizational citizenship behaviors and openness to change collectively facilitate the achievement of sustainable performance. Therefore, organizational trust serves as a vital bridge linking altruistic leadership to sustainable outcomes.

Hence, this study proposes: H2: Organizational

trust mediates the relationship between altruistic leadership and sustainable corporate performance.

3.1.3 The moderating role of environmental uncertainty

This study further introduces environmental uncertainty as a moderating variable to examine the boundary conditions of altruistic leadership's effectiveness. According to situational strength theory, in highly uncertain environments, employees experience stronger needs for clear guidance, psychological safety, and emotional support [6]. Under such conditions, the stability, empathy, and selflessness displayed by altruistic leaders become critical sources of reassurance and motivation. As Laozi insightfully observed in *Tao Te Ching*, "When the great way is abandoned, benevolence and righteousness arise." In turbulent times, the moral power of altruistic leadership becomes particularly evident. In contrast, in stable and predictable contexts, supportive leadership behaviors may be perceived as normative, thus yielding lower marginal utility.

Therefore, environmental uncertainty strengthens the relationship between altruistic leadership and organizational trust. In uncertain conditions, employees are more likely to perceive and appreciate altruistic behaviors, translating them into stronger organizational trust.

Hence, this study proposes:

H3: Environmental uncertainty positively moderates the relationship between altruistic leadership and organizational trust; that is, the higher the environmental uncertainty, the stronger the positive impact of altruistic leadership on organizational trust.

3.1.4 The Mediated Moderation Effect

Integrating the preceding hypotheses, environmental uncertainty not only moderates the relationship between altruistic leadership and organizational trust but also shapes the indirect effect of altruistic leadership on sustainable performance through trust. Specifically, because the positive impact of altruistic leadership on organizational trust is stronger under high uncertainty (H3), and organizational trust serves as a key mechanism enhancing sustainable performance (H2), it follows that the indirect effect of altruistic leadership on sustainable performance through trust will be more pronounced when environmental uncertainty is high.

Hence, this study proposes:

H4: Environmental uncertainty moderates the mediating effect of organizational trust on the relationship between altruistic leadership and sustainable corporate performance; the indirect effect is stronger under high environmental uncertainty than under low environmental uncertainty.

Based on these hypotheses, this study constructs an integrated theoretical framework that systematically illustrates the internal mechanisms and boundary conditions through which altruistic leadership drives humanistic entrepreneurship. The proposed model represents a mediated moderation framework, with its core constructs and relationships presented in Figure 1.

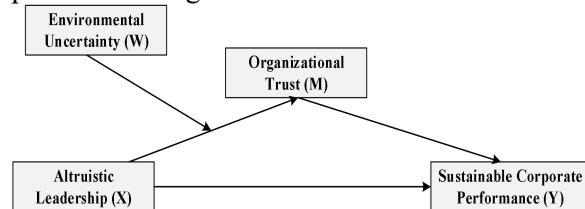


Figure 1. The Mediated Moderation Model

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Research Strategy

This study adopts a single-case study design based on mechanism-based explanation [13], aiming to systematically reveal the internal causal mechanisms through which altruistic leadership influences humanistic entrepreneurship.

By selecting Dilu Company as the focal case, the study employs process tracing to analyze the dynamic relationships among leadership decisions, organizational responses, and performance outcomes.

The case study approach treats practical business contexts as natural laboratories for observing deep mechanisms and deriving theoretically meaningful causal explanations. Within this framework, research validity is ensured through the rigor of mechanism explanation and the completeness of theoretical construction.

4.2 Case Selection and Data Sources

4.2.1 Case selection

Following the principle of theoretical sampling, Dilu Company was chosen based on its comprehensive value in typicality, theoretical inspiration, and contextual integrity.

First, Dilu Company represents a typical example of China's social enterprises and humanistic entrepreneurship. Its "Happy Life" philosophy and corresponding institutional arrangements and practices provide a concrete context for examining the integration between the "human life cycle" and the "enterprise life cycle."

Second, from a theoretical perspective, the founder Nie Shengzhe's leadership philosophy, decision-making logic, and public statements reflect the core ideas of altruistic leadership. Moreover, the company's broad exposure in both media and academia provides rich supporting materials for research.

Finally, Dilu Company's developmental process has undergone multiple external shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturns. This complete historical trajectory provides a naturally sequenced context for exploring the moderating role of environmental uncertainty.

4.2.2 Data sources

To ensure reliability and validity, this study builds a multi-source and cross-verified data system, covering four major aspects:

First, regarding internal documentation, materials on Dilu's official website and the founder's columns were systematically collected, along with 158 management-related blog posts by Nie Shengzhe on Sina Blog (about 300,000 words in total), which provide first-hand evidence for understanding his values and decision logic.

Second, from external perspectives, 32 in-depth reports published between 1998 and 2024 were retrieved from authoritative media such as CEIBS Business Review and Southern Weekly using the CNKI and WiseNews databases. These reports include interviews with multiple stakeholders, effectively supplementing internal data with employees' and external observers' views.

Third, three MBA teaching cases and one industry practice report compiled by institutions such as CEIBS and Zhejiang University School of Management were incorporated to provide third-party analytical perspectives.

Finally, five videos of Nie Shengzhe's public lectures and talks (about 480 minutes in total) were transcribed and analyzed, resulting in approximately 80,000 words of text. These materials capture his emotional tendencies and logical emphases in spontaneous communication,

enriching the understanding of his leadership style.

Overall, the multiple data sources complement each other in both content and perspective, supporting a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the case.

4.3 Data Analysis Methods

This study combines process tracing with the Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) framework [14] to systematically reveal the pathways through which altruistic leadership affects corporate sustainable performance.

During data analysis, a time-sequenced narrative chain was first constructed by integrating multi-source data longitudinally, forming a complete event sequence that included leadership decisions, environmental changes, employee responses, and organizational outcomes, providing the temporal basis for identifying causal relationships.

In the mechanism verification stage, the principle of dual evidence was applied. On the one hand, institutional documents and related materials served as evidence to confirm the existence of mechanism carriers; on the other hand, qualitative materials such as employee interviews were used to verify the activation of mechanisms at the psychological and behavioral levels. This approach ensures the theoretical validity of causal inference.

To ensure reliability, two researchers conducted independent grounded coding, and coding consistency was maintained through regular checks and third-party arbitration. This systematic analysis procedure provides methodological support for exploring the complex relationship between altruistic leadership and humanistic entrepreneurship.

4.3.1 Content analysis

In the content analysis stage, textual data were structurally coded. Key statements, events, or decisions related to core constructs were defined as analytical units, and an initial codebook was developed containing constructs such as "altruistic leadership" and "organizational trust." Two researchers independently conducted coding. For example, the founder's promise to "help grassroots employees afford housing" was coded as "Altruistic Leadership – Material Empowerment"; the commitment to "no layoffs or salary cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic" was coded as "Altruistic Behavior under Environmental Uncertainty" and "Organizational

Trust Signal"; while the "employee turnover rate lower than the industry average" was coded as "Outcome of Organizational Trust" and "Social Performance."

After coding, disagreements were resolved through discussion to ensure reliability. In addition, as shown in Figure 2, the word cloud generated from the frequency analysis of "humanistic entrepreneurship" provides intuitive quantitative support for understanding the case.

4.3.2 Pattern Matching

In the final stage, pattern matching was applied to compare the theoretical expectation model with the empirical observation model.

At the theoretical level, this study constructed a causal framework involving mediating and moderating mechanisms, proposing that altruistic leadership promotes organizational trust through mechanisms of social exchange and psychological safety, which in turn enhances sustainable performance. It further assumes that environmental uncertainty positively moderates this process.



Figure 2. Visualization of the Word Cloud

At the empirical level, the analysis of Dilu Company demonstrates a high degree of consistency with theoretical expectations. The founder's altruistic actions beyond contractual obligations—such as the "Filial Piety Fund"—effectively stimulated employees' reciprocal motivation and emotional identification, while external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic significantly strengthened the link between leadership behavior and organizational trust, eventually resulting in observable organizational resilience and performance recovery.

Therefore, the empirical patterns observed in Dilu—such as the order of construct emergence, mechanism activation, and contextual catalysis—correspond closely with the proposed theoretical model. These results not only support the four hypotheses of this study but also verify the effectiveness of the overall causal framework from altruistic leadership to humanistic entrepreneurship.

5. Case Analysis and Findings

5.1 Verification of Core Mechanism Operation

Through in-depth process tracing of the Dettol case, two key and interrelated causal mechanisms were identified, which clearly explain how altruistic leadership transforms individual goodwill into superior sustainable performance. Systematic coding analysis reveals that altruistic leadership behaviors in Dettol are not manifested as scattered management strategies. Instead, these behaviors are intensive and constitute an internally coherent value system.

5.1.1 Mechanism 1: activating social exchange and reciprocity norms through "extra-contractual behaviors"

This study finds that altruistic leadership effectively elevates employment relationships from economic exchange to social exchange through extra-contractual behaviors [15]. These behaviors are characterized by pronounced asymmetry—the value provided by the organization far exceeds employees' contractual expectations, without requiring equivalent reciprocation. Specific examples are shown in Table 1.

Such extra-contractual behaviors trigger profound psychological mechanisms. When employees continuously perceive benevolent acts that go beyond expectations, their internal reciprocity norms are activated, generating a strong sense of obligation to reciprocate. Empirical evidence indicates that this psychological mechanism leads to higher organizational commitment and more proactive work behaviors. As shown in Figure 3, Dettol's employee turnover rate has remained below 5% for an extended period, significantly lower than the industry average, while employees' spontaneous process improvements and mutual assistance have become key drivers of organizational effectiveness.

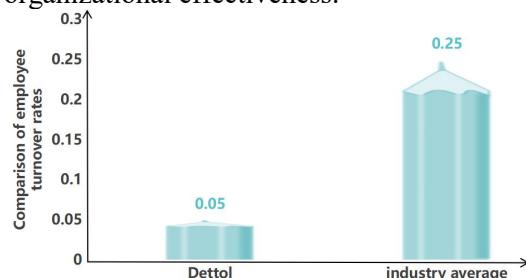


Figure 3. Comparison of Employee Turnover Rates: Dettol versus Industry Average

This mechanism provides critical evidence for Hypothesis H2: extra-contractual behaviors cultivate robust organizational trust by establishing social exchange relationships grounded in reciprocity, thereby clarifying the internal pathway through which altruistic leadership enhances organizational effectiveness. In essence, extra-contractual behaviors construct

a social exchange cycle centered on goodwill and trust. This mechanism empirically substantiates the mediating role of organizational trust proposed in H2, indicating that altruistic leadership promotes humanistic entrepreneurship by stimulating social exchange and fostering stable organizational trust.

Table 1. “Extra-Contractual Behaviors” and Evidence of Mechanism Activation

Behavior	Description of Practice	Evidence of Mechanism Activation
“Filial Piety Bonus” System	Since 2010, the company has directly deposited a monthly allowance into employees’ mothers’ bank accounts. The founder explained, “This is the company’s way of helping employees fulfill filial responsibilities and reinforcing family values.”	An employee interviewed by Southern Weekly stated: “The amount of money itself doesn’t matter that much. What touched me was that my parents felt I was working for a company with deep human affection. I feel compelled to give back to the company and our general manager with concrete actions.”
Lifetime Employment Commitment	Founder Shengzhe Nie publicly promised on multiple occasions and codified in the company charter: “Except for criminal offenses, Dettol will never dismiss any employee.”	A veteran technician who had worked for over 20 years told China Business Review: “Here, you don’t have to worry about being ‘optimized’ at 35 or 40. You can focus on refining your craft and improving your skills. This sense of stability is something no pay raise can replace.”
Unlimited Medical and Educational Assistance	When employees or their immediate family members suffer from major illnesses or require financial support for their children’s education, the company provides full financial aid without any cap.	Media once reported a case where an employee’s child was diagnosed with leukemia, and the company covered all related medical expenses, exceeding one million yuan. The employee said, “The company saved my child and my family. If the company ever needs me, I will do anything for it.”

5.1.2 Mechanism 2: building psychological safety through organizational safeguards

This study finds that altruistic leadership builds a stable institutional foundation for high levels of psychological safety by establishing reliable organizational safeguards. Taking Dettol’s “no assessment, no penalty” principle as an example, this system operates through three interrelated pathways: (1) by eliminating the threat of punishment for mistakes, it significantly reduces employees’ trial-and-error costs and provides a safety buffer for innovation; (2) by fostering a non-judgmental communication atmosphere, it encourages employees to express dissenting opinions, thereby improving organizational learning and error-correction capabilities; and (3) by removing external control mechanisms, it effectively stimulates employees’ intrinsic motivation, shifting their work drive from avoiding punishment to pursuing excellence. Meanwhile, environmental uncertainty positively moderates this mechanism. During periods of external shocks, the protective commitments demonstrated by altruistic

leadership become more salient, amplifying the leadership’s impact on the construction of psychological safety. This finding suggests that psychological safety serves as a crucial mediating variable between altruistic leadership and humanistic entrepreneurship, and this mediating process strengthens as environmental uncertainty increases, ultimately leading to enhanced sustainable innovation performance. In summary, this section reveals a mediated moderation mechanism: altruistic leadership fosters psychological safety through strong organizational safeguards, thereby driving humanistic entrepreneurship; environmental uncertainty positively moderates the “altruistic leadership → psychological safety” pathway. This finding refines the underlying mechanism of altruistic leadership and provides an important theoretical explanation for the sustainability of humanistic entrepreneurship under turbulent conditions.

5.2 Validation of the Catalytic Role of Key Contextual Factors

This study finds that environmental uncertainty exerts a significant catalytic effect on the mechanism linking altruistic leadership and organizational trust, providing strong empirical support for Hypotheses H3 and H4. Specifically, through an in-depth analysis of Dettol's management practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, three reinforcing pathways were identified through which environmental uncertainty strengthens the effects of altruistic leadership.

First, crisis situations enhance the signaling value of leadership behaviors-within an environment where most organizations adopt conservative strategies, altruistic actions become more distinctive and credible due to their rarity and contrast. Second, based on conservation of resources theory, uncertainty intensifies employees' demand for stability, making organizational guarantees more psychologically valuable and effective. Third, shared experiences in coping with crises strengthen the emotional bonds between employees and the organization, deepening identification and belonging.

Empirical evidence shows that during the pandemic, Dettol's commitment to "no layoffs and no salary cuts" significantly improved employees' organizational trust. When market conditions later recovered, the company, benefiting from its stable team structure and high employee commitment, achieved a rapid performance rebound well above the industry average.

This complete causal chain confirms that environmental uncertainty not only directly reinforces the relationship between altruistic leadership and organizational trust but also amplifies the indirect effect of organizational trust on corporate sustainable performance.

In conclusion, the Dettol case validates the catalytic role of environmental uncertainty, refines the theoretical framework of how altruistic leadership drives humanistic entrepreneurship, and provides robust empirical evidence for the proposed moderated mediation model.

6. Conclusion

Through a systematic case study, this research reveals the concrete role of altruistic leadership in promoting corporate sustainability. The core findings can be summarized as follows. First, altruistic leadership effectively fosters a high level of organizational trust among employees.

Second, this trust relationship becomes more salient under conditions of heightened environmental uncertainty, serving as a crucial buffering mechanism that enables firms to cope with external challenges. Finally, the study validates the reliability of the transmission path of "altruistic leadership-organizational trust-sustainable performance," particularly highlighting its strengthening effect in turbulent environments.

These findings deepen our understanding of human-centered entrepreneurial practices. A management model that prioritizes employee well-being not only contributes to building a harmonious organizational climate but also serves as an effective pathway to enhancing corporate resilience. In an increasingly complex and volatile business environment, cultivating altruistic leadership and advancing human-centered development will be key to achieving sustainable growth. Future research will further refine the theoretical framework of human-centered entrepreneurship, providing both theoretical support and practical guidance for enterprises seeking to build sustainable competitiveness amid environmental uncertainty.

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