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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Antecedents and outcomes of enabling HR practices: The paradox of consistency and flexibility

Jongwook Pak[1] | Hossein Heidarian Ghaleh[2] | Zhenzhong Ma[3,4] | Muhammad Naseer Akhtar[2]

[1]The University of Auckland Business School, Auckland, New Zealand

[2]Royal Docks School of Business and Law, University of East London, London, UK

[3]School of Economics and Management, Harbin Institute of Technology, Shenzhen, China

[4]Odette School of Business, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence
Zhenzhong Ma, School of Economics and Management, Harbin Institute of Technology, Shenzhen, China; Odette School of Business, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Ave, Windsor, ON N9B 3P4, Canada.
Email: maz@uwindsor.ca

Abstract

Reconciling competing demands for consistent HR implementation and providing individualized supervisor support to employees has always been a challenge in strategic human resource management. Given that there is burgeoning evidence that frontline managers (FLMs) are at the center of HR implementation, we examine how the organization helps FLMs reconcile demands for consistent HR implementation and deliver individualized support to those under their supervision. With the data from 181 FLMs and 311 employees reported to these FLMs, we find that FLMs' perceived enabling HR practices mediate the relationship between high-performance work systems and FLMs' willingness to be flexible (WTBF). Furthermore, WTBF mediates the relationship between FLMs' perceived enabling HR practices and consistent HR implementation and between FLMs' perceived enabling HR practices and employees' individualized support. Our study offers new insights by highlighting that an effective HR system is not merely improving FLMs' HR competency and knowledge but capturing FLMs' WTBF in carrying on a broad range of HR

Abbreviations: AMO, ability, motivation and opportunity; FLMs, frontline managers; HPWS, high-performance work systems; SHRM, strategic human resource management; WTBF, willingness to be flexible.

tasks. Furthermore, our study provides an expanded and novel understanding that FLMs will likely face two opposite HR tasks that coexist and should be dealt with simultaneously as a pair. We then discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and suggest future research directions.

KEYWORDS
frontline manager, HR consistency, individualized support, perceived enabling HR, willingness to be flexible

Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Contemporary HRM research confirms the necessity of devolving HR responsibilities to frontline managers (FLMs).
- FLMs' HR involvement and subsequent HR performance are primarily driven by their HR knowledge, ability, and skills.
- Effective HR implementation entails two opposing responsibilities, including HR consistency and delivering individualized support to employees.

What does this study add?

- A key component of a successful HR system is to enable FLMs to fulfill both organizational expectations and managerial responsibilities towards their subordinates when employees demand individualized support and attention.
- The enablement of FLMs should go beyond merely enhancing their knowledge and HR competency. It should also capture FLMs' willingness to be flexible (WTBF) so that they have both the motivation and the discretion to devote their efforts to various HR tasks.
- FLMs' *WTBF* is crucial for FLMs to alternate between their competing tasks of consistent HR implementation and delivering individualized support to subordinates.
- Discussing FLMs' effective implementation behaviors would be irrelevant if the paradox in their HR involvement is not factored in. This is an important distinction, as flexibility does not lie in the HR system per se but largely hinges on FLMs' behavioral choices.

The implications for practitioners

- There should not be a single focus on consistent HR implementation and employee outcomes. FLMs expected to understand the HR system should be attentive and sensitive to the firm's and individual employees' unique needs and expectations.
- High-performance work systems should be cautiously implemented to trigger FLMs' WTBF; otherwise, they might experience work intensification and withdraw from their HR involvement.
- Effective HR implementation should be observed and measured as the product of consistency and delivery of individualized support. Polarization toward either one places the HR system on the verge of failure.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Empirical evidence has shown that the effectiveness of HRM is heavily influenced by the HR implementation behaviors of frontline managers (FLMs) (López-Cotarelo, 2018; Pak & Kim, 2018; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Teague & Roche, 2012). This has led to a growing interest in delegating HR responsibilities to the frontline (Gilbert et al., 2011; Perry & Kulik, 2008). FLMs, being responsible for overseeing daily employee operations and often the first point of contact between the organization and its employees due to their proximity (Crawshaw & Game, 2015; McConville, 2006), play a pivotal role in bringing HR policies and practices to life for employees at the ground level (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Shipton et al., 2016). As a result, both scholars and practitioners have shown a keen interest in considering FLMs as HR agents, implicitly assuming that FLMs enact HR policies in line with the standards set by the HR department to bridge the gap between intended and enacted HR practices (Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022).

While prior research has demonstrated that FLMs' HR involvement can fill the gap between espoused and actual HR practices to address the so-called *HR consistency* problem (Pak, 2022; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Teague & Roche, 2012), scholars also argue that FLMs have their own *modus operandi* in enacting HR practices in their employees and they do not necessarily carry on HR practices as designed at the top of the organization (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Harris, 2001; Pak, 2022). Therefore, FLMs may not simply submit themselves to the HR system's expectations; they may implement HR practices based on their discretion and awareness of their subordinates' needs (Bondarouk et al., 2016; Pak, 2022; Sanders & Yang, 2016). These contradictions imply that a critical paradox exists in FLMs' implementation behaviors that should be adequately addressed: on the one hand, HR practices must be delivered consistently in an equal and fair manner across the organization (López-Cotarelo, 2018). On the other hand, each employee in the organization must be treated in a unique way, with HR implementation tailored to their individual needs (Gilbert et al., 2015; Ryu & Kim, 2013; Sikora & Ferris, 2014) given that FLMs are positioned in an organizational hierarchy wherein their actions have an immediate impact on employees (Poole & Jenkins, 1997).

More recently, Fu et al. (2020) have shown that FLMs who balance consistency and individualized consideration can improve employee performance and team effectiveness. However, their study does not unveil what comes before FLMs' paradoxical implementation behaviors and how they can be triggered and fostered. In other words, their study merely focuses on the desired outcomes of FLMs' balanced behaviors, without much to say about their determinants. Therefore, it remains unclear what needs to be done to help FLMs deal with conflicting demands for consistency and personalized employee support. Our review of related literature shows that the devolution literature devoted little attention, if any, to the intricacy and paradoxes laid in FLMs' HR role. Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) also contemplated the paradoxical nature of FLMs' HR role. Still, their study has not investigated this issue in an empirical setting, leaving the question unanswered of how FLMs balance demands from superiors (i.e., consistency) and subordinates (i.e., personalized support) simultaneously. Further scrutiny in this line of research is thus warranted.

Furthermore, past research has reported that FLMs are often unwilling to undertake their HR responsibilities and believe that *HR is not their job* (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022). Some also reported that FLMs consider HR tasks as something out of their domain of expertise and conflicting with their operational tasks (Harris et al., 2002; Renwick, 2000). Responding to this challenge, efforts have been made to deepen the knowledge of how to improve FLMs' HR-related competence and willingness mainly through the lens of ability, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing HR framework (AMO) (e.g., Bos-Nehles, 2013; Trullen et al., 2016). Notwithstanding this line of inquiry generates insight into enhancing FLMs' HR dexterity and knowledge, some research still underlines skepticism around FLMs' eagerness and flexibility to be involved in various HR roles. Paralleling this controversy, some scholars argue that HPWS can increase job strain (Huang et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2013). Relatedly, Guest (2017) contends that the link between HR systems and performance has been pursued at the expense of reduced concern for employees. Hence, it is possible that FLMs subject to HPWS may experience work

intensification, stress, and consequently reduced motivation, which undermines their HR engagement and flexibility (Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022; Van De Voorde et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). Taken together, with mixed and often contradictory results, it is not clear whether and how FLMs could flexibly tackle consistent implementation of HR policies while serving employees with individualized support.

In this study, we propose that one of the potential causes behind the mixed findings on desired implementation behaviors is overlooking FLMs' perceptions toward organizational support and resulting flexible attitudes toward their HR duties. We argue that FLMs are not only HR agents but also primary recipients of HR practices in the context of HPWS (Huang et al., 2018; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022). Drawing on social exchange theory (SET) (Gouldner, 1960), the current study unpacks how FLMs respond to HR support. The tenet of SET posits that relationships evolve into trusting, mutual commitment, and reciprocation (Blau, 1964). In this light, if FLMs find firms' HR practices (i.e., HPWS) have eyes on their needs and assist them in fulfilling their HR tasks, they will hold a favorable attitude toward the HR system as enabling (i.e., *perceived enabling HR*). In particular, we posit that FLMs' perceived enabling HR mediates the relationship between HPWS and FLMs' willingness to be flexible (WTBF). FLMs' perceived enabling HR refers to the extent to which FLMs find that the HR department respects their managerial discreetness and leadership insights and gives them space and volition to address their subordinates' unique needs. Recent advancements in SET demonstrate that empowerment practices and enhancing individuals' autonomy and confidence are more likely to foster beliefs in mutual obligations, commitment, and reciprocity (Yin et al., 2019). In this sense, if FLMs conceive that HR is aiming at enhancing their managerial dexterity and equip them with reasonable volition, this perception of HR system as enabling would trigger FLMs' WTBF as an intention and inner driver to go beyond their tasks and reciprocate HR with effective involvement in people management responsibilities. By definition, WTBF refers to the willingness to adapt to the way other people work and cope with differences in conditions or environment (Solberg et al., 2021). FLMs with greater WTBF consider their working environment and roles from multiple perspectives, fully grasp the complexities of their HR responsibilities, and alternate between various HR tasks.

Furthermore, in this study, we specifically examine how FLMs' WTBF mediates the relationship between enabling HR practices and HR consistency and employees' individualized support to delineate the dynamic nature of the paradox of consistency and flexibility facing FLMs. Based on SET, we reason that FLMs' WTBF, on the one side, slips them toward consistent HR implementation because they are trained, entrusted, and named *HR agents*, which imposes them under normative pressure to enact HR in line with HR department expectations. On the other side, upon the promise of SET, some commentators argue that HR can create a climate of psychological fulfillment in which individuals go beyond bilateral reciprocation and are involved in extra responsibilities that benefit all (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Rupp et al., 2014). Given that employees are salient others to their immediate managers, FLMs should not disregard subordinates' needs or what they deem desirable for employees. Therefore, WTBF allows FLMs to find themselves empowered enough to consider subordinates' needs while enacting HR consistently (c.f., Kehoe & Han, 2020).

This study makes several significant contributions. By exploring the mediating role of enabling HR practices in the relationship between HPWS and FLMs' WTBF, we first aim to help resolve the long-lasting challenge that FLMs believe *HR is not their job* (c.f., Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022; Op de Beeck et al., 2016; Renwick, 2003). Our examination of perceived enabling HR is beyond merely emphasizing training and supporting FLMs. We argue that FLMs seek to ensure undertaking HR tasks would not limit their leadership and managerial insight but come to value their discretion and allow them to adjust HR based on employees' needs while serving HR equally. Even though past research warns that FLMs are reluctant to undertake HR tasks and HR should thus assist them and propose solutions, this approach remains limited in that it only focuses on enhancing FLMs' HR knowledge and ability. However, triggering FLMs' willingness and flexibility remained an untested assumption. Investigating FLMs' WTBF as a result of enabling HR practices provides a springboard for more advancement in this direction. Second, this study addresses the recent calls by Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) and Kehoe and Han (2020), encouraging scholars to explore further how FLMs respond to conflicting demands for consistency and individualized support. We also

respond to Nishii and Paluch's (2018) and Chacko and Conway's (2019) concerns, arguing that an effective HR system is not merely about predicting consistency but also allowing for a reasonable deviation from espoused HR practices. Thus, we empirically demonstrated that FLMs embody a broader HR role and should simultaneously serve the organization and meet the needs of the employees they oversee. We add to the literature by demonstrating that FLMs' effective HR performance should be measured as the combination of their subordinates' satisfaction with the way HR policies are implemented to meet their needs on the work floor (i.e., flexibility) and how their implementation behaviors are equal and fair, in line with the firm's HR policies and practices (i.e., consistency).

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Involving FLMs in HR process is primarily motivated by ensuring HR practices are uniformly delivered throughout the organization in order to reduce the variability in HR implementation (Guest, 2021). In this context, effective HR implementation is to enact HR in line with HR department's expectations, and consequently, flexibility and deviation from designed HR practices have turned into intolerable assumptions (Sikora et al., 2015). An in-depth perusal of the said literature shows that the reality of FLMs' people management responsibility, that is, the paradox of switching between satisfying higher authority's (i.e., HR department) and subordinates' demands, is not sufficiently mirrored in contemporary HR research. While competing demands for consistency and flexibility often co-exist in today's organizations, the common quest in empirical inquiries surprisingly only revolves around preparing FLMs for consistent HR implementation, which is a less suitable lens (Fu et al., 2020; Kehoe & Han, 2020). This may partially explain why research on FLMs' willingness and involvement in HR function points to mixed and discrepant findings and why FLMs still show frail attention and willingness toward their HR responsibilities (Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022).

Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) also raise the concern that the long-granted positive link between HR consistency and employees' performance has blurred the reality of paradoxical HR responsibilities that FLMs often have to deal with in organizations. Relatedly, Björkman et al. (2011) and Kehoe and Han (2020) argue that unilaterally emphasizing FLMs' consistent HR implementation only conveys an instrumentalist view toward FLMs, which cannot capture FLMs' critical role in full. However, notwithstanding the importance of FLMs' attention to employees' unique needs and flexible HR enactment has gradually come to the surface of the devolution dialog, the critical question of how to prepare FLMs and elicit their willingness for ambidextrous people management is still under studied. This motivated us to revisit the important yet lingering question in HRM literature: How can FLMs serve HR systems with consistent implementation and, at the same time, respond to employees' unique needs with flexibility? Previous research often argues that FLMs' aversion or defensiveness regarding people management responsibilities stems from their perceived inability, lack of control over their HR role, and *ought*-related competence standards (Townsend et al., 2012). The follow-up study by Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) shows that FLMs also have an inner tendency to shield their subordinates from unwelcoming work practices, which might be a reason why FLMs resist accepting their HR duties because accepting HR duties often places a great pressure on FLMs to address HR department's expectations. In other words, being responsive to subordinates' needs and serving them with unique attention and implementing HR policies consistently in organizations creates a paradox on FLMs' HR duties.

Building on this core idea, our study draws on SET to examine the impact of HPWS on FLMs' perceived enabling HR practices, WTBF, HR consistency, and individualized support to employees. Social exchange theory posits that if organizations initiate supportive actions or provide resources, they foster reciprocal behaviors in response to the initiating action (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Flynn, 2005). Therefore, SET provides a useful lens to explain how HR policies convey organizational support and attention to FLMs as the first recipient of HR practices and what the organizations expect to receive in return for these HR practices (Chang et al., 2020; Guzzo &

Noonan, 1994). It is expected that implementing HPWS can enhance FLMs' managerial competencies by supplying them with HR-related knowledge and guides to increase their HR related abilities and by shaping positive attitudes among FLMs toward their HR responsibilities to increase their motivation. Furthermore, opportunity-enhancing HR policies boost FLMs' perceived behavioral control over how they enact HR in their work units at their discretion (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). In line with the central logic of SET and in reaction to the positive and supportive HPWS in place, FLMs tend to reply in kind by engaging in more positive reciprocating responses such as involvement in effective HR enactment (Kilroy et al., 2023). Though SET has been traditionally viewed as a mechanical dyadic reciprocation, recent advancements unveil that social exchange-based workplace practices can create high levels of trust and unrestricted commitment to the organization, resulting in individuals going beyond to offer help and distribute valued resources to people in the group who need them (Chang et al., 2020; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Flynn, 2005; Sun et al., 2007). In this matter, SET offers a compelling argument that when HR practices (i.e., HPWS) are perceived enabling by FLMs, it is a reasonable expectation that FLMs are willing to engage in multiple reciprocal actions, such as reciprocating the organization support with consistent HR implementation in their work units and simultaneously serving their subordinates with individualized attention to ensure the well-functioning of their teams.

We argue in this study that FLMs' perceived enabling HR, as the aggregation of FLMs' perceived ability, mastery, confidence, and control over HR implementation (c.f., Kuvaas et al., 2014), not only tackles their aversion to HR responsibilities but also triggers their WTBF. In this light, unlike prior research that directly relates FLMs' perception of HR to their subsequent HR implementation, we believe FLMs' perceived enabling HR is linked to WTBF and further to HR implementation behaviors. With high WTBF, FLMs can consider multiple viewpoints and reconcile demands for consistency and individualized employee support. FLMs with a strong WTBF also have a powerful impetus to understand their critical position, stimulating them to undertake a broader range of responsibilities along with their operational goals. In this sense, FLMs with WTBF feel connected with the HR department because they are encouraged to act as an enabled HR agent, and thus they are prepared to implement HR policies with consistency; they also feel inherently connected and committed to employees under their supervision and thus they are willing to deliver individualized support to employees with flexibility.

2.1 | HPWS, perceived enabling HR, and WTBF

The field of strategic human resource management (SHRM) has widely recognized the importance of HPWS in improving both individual and organizational performance (Huang et al., 2018; Messersmith et al., 2018). HPWS can be broadly defined as a set of interconnected HR practices aimed at enhancing workforce skills, increasing employee participation in decision-making, and motivating employees to exert discretionary effort (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Datta et al., 2005; Huang et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2012). HPWS includes HR practices such as selective staffing, various employee communication programs, extensive training, team-based work, results-oriented appraisal, and performance-related pay (Huselid, 1995; Sun et al., 2007). When these practices are used in combination, HPWS are said to be mutually reinforcing and able to generate superior organizational performance (Huang et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2007).

Meanwhile, Contemporary HR research has shown that merely designing an HR system is not sufficient, and the critical contribution of the HR department is to prepare FLMs for their HR roles by equipping them with necessary skills and knowledge, rewarding their HR performance, and providing them with support and decision-making power (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). In other words, the initiatives of the HR department do not directly predict the effectiveness of HR implementation on the ground floor of the organization but through FLMs' perceived ability, motivation, and opportunity to deliver HR (Salvador-Gómez et al., 2023). Understanding how FLMs perceive and interpret HR practices is thus crucial for their successful implementation (Alfes et al., 2021; Op de Beeck et al., 2016; Vermeeren, 2014). On this matter, SET provides an overarching framework to explain how FLMs' implementation behavior

stems from the support and attention they receive from the HR department in handling HR duties. At the core of SET, individuals' perceived empowerment and enablement motivates them to compensate their organization by exhibiting favorable behaviors (Beltrán-Martín et al., 2017; Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 1986).

In this sense, enhancing FLMs' knowledge and managerial skills gives them higher confidence and self-efficacy, encouraging them to put forth more effort and perseverance in the face of HR challenges (Heraty et al., 1995; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022; Nehles et al., 2006). Particularly, with respect to motivation-enhancing practices, we argue that FLMs' involvement in HR responsibilities can be viewed from a different angle; that is, more dedication to HR duties may come with more improvement in team performance and goal achievement, which is accompanied by more reward and recognition for FLMs (c.f., Trullen et al., 2016; Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018). In this light, undertaking HR responsibilities operates as an invisible motivational force that can offer benefits to FLMs. In addition, opportunity-enhancing practices equip FLMs with more volition and perceived empowerment, convincing FLMs that HR respects their managerial discretion and values their leadership potential. Thus, it is a fair assumption that the application of the AMO framework triggers FLMs' confidence in their ability to successfully fulfill broad roles and operate flexibly.

From the SET perspective, when FLMs perceive that the HR system is enabling (i.e., perceived enabling HR) and keeps an eye on their needs, they might feel indebted and repay the organization by undertaking a broad range of HR responsibilities and operating flexibility. Precisely speaking, FLMs' perceived enabling HR refers to the belief that the HR system helps them fulfill their people management responsibilities (Kuvaas et al., 2014). In this process, when FLMs are trained, empowered, and untrusted, they show an inherent interest and are naturally attracted to doing HR, so the decision to be involved in HR is self-determined and not force-fed by the organization. This inspires FLMs to reciprocate this level of trust with willingness and flexibility, contributing to HR enactment, and they are also aware of the benefits of the value they offer to the subordinates and the value they add to the organization. Conversely, FLMs with lower training opportunities and less perceived trust and empowerment from the HR department may feel HR tasks have been imposed on them, showing frail commitment and obligation to HR and putting less effort into their implementation responsibilities.

Op de Beeck et al. (2016) warn us that while the HR departments optimistically assume they are supporting FLMs to gain FLMs' HR partnership, the perceptual discrepancies between HR and FLMs are delaying the FLMs' HR involvement from reaching its climax. Relatedly, Kehoe and Han (2020) argue that FLMs should perceive their HR duties as relevant to their values, and they can enact HR practices at their discretion. Otherwise, only assuming FLMs as a messenger of HR function, who are expected to act quite on par with HR department expectations, risks overlooking their critical values regarding their subordinates. Desired HR implementation is not only a function of ability and competency but also the result of having the power and flexibility to enact HR in a socially desirable manner to respond to important others' expectations (i.e., subordinates) (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). It is thus contended in this study that HPWS improves FLMs' WTBF by positively influencing FLMs' perception of HR (i.e., enabling HR). WTBF is a powerful driver that enhances FLMs' desire to adopt a broader perspective on HR implementation. If WTBF is triggered appropriately, FLMs may not feel they are the victim of undertaking HR duties, but they believe their leadership discretion is counted and credited, and this favorable treatment is expected to engender favorable reciprocity on the FLMs' side (Gouldner, 1960; Kilroy et al., 2023). Based on this line of reasoning, we hypothesize that:

H1 FLMs' perceived enabling HR mediates the relationship between HPWS and WTBF.

2.2 | HR consistency and individualized support

The consistent implementation of HR practices across the organization is crucial in shaping an integrated organizational climate and promoting desired employee behaviors (Baron & Kreps, 1999; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004;

García-Carbonell et al., 2018). HR consistency refers to the fair and systematic implementation of HR policies across the organization with no intent to discriminate (Kuvaas, 2008), reducing the risk of unfair treatment perceptions and impaired performance (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Kuvaas, 2008). When FLMs are committed to implementing HR practices consistently and fairly, their actions become an effective vehicle for communicating the goals and philosophies behind espoused HR policies and practices (Yang & Arthur, 2021).

In contrast, some scholars have raised the concern that FLMs' involvement in HR may undermine overall HR consistency because FLMs may be unable or unwilling to carry out HR practices in accordance with HR guidelines and might act upon their *modus operandi* (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Kou et al., 2022) to consider their employees' needs. It is argued that FLMs' implementation behaviors are often affected by subordinates' sense of satisfaction and the credibility they obtain from their subordinates to implement particular HR activities (i.e., normative pressures) (Pak, 2022). Some also argue that FLMs tend to serve their supervisees with idiosyncratic attention, through which they can ensure employees' effective performance (Kelly et al., 2020; Kehoe & Han, 2020). Therefore, FLMs must take into account the differences among employees and customize HR practices to their work unit's needs. While employees expect fair and consistent treatment, they also value their immediate supervisor's attention to their specific needs, recognition of their contributions, and support for their development and growth (Cheng et al., 2015; Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003).

To consistently implement HR practices and concurrently keep an eye on individual employees' needs for support and attention, it is important for FLMs to perceive they have control over their enactment behavior so that they are willing to adjust. Surprisingly, most prior research considers FLMs' perception of HR as the direct determinant of FLMs' HR performance, and the measuring of FLMs' HR performance is often polarized toward consistent implementation of HR policies (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; García-Carbonell et al., 2018). However, to meet the duality between consistency and flexibility in practice, FLMs also need to have the willingness and flexibility to voluntarily switch between competing HR tasks. WTBF is thus an essential driver that enables FLMs to adopt a broader perspective on HR practices and foster positive attitudes towards the HR system to manage conflicting demands. The concept of WTBF highlights the internalization of HR responsibilities and the powerful motivation and adaptability necessary for managing changes in the work environment (Solberg et al., 2021).

The guiding principle in SET is that reciprocation is not limited to turning favor back to the initiator of favor or in-role tasks, but according to the generalized social exchange perspective (Flynn, 2005), one (FLMs) might return a sense of favor that they have received from their organization (i.e., HR department) to other people in that organization (i.e., subordinates). In other words, individuals reciprocate what they have received from the organization by showing attention toward their subordinates (Chang et al., 2020). It is because helping or serving subordinates with individualized attention is believed to contribute to achieving the objectives of the organization. In light of SET, when FLMs receive enabling HR services, are entrusted and given authority, and receive normative signals from superiors and subordinates to be involved in HR responsibilities, FLMs may feel obligated to convey gratitude to both the organization and the people they oversee because they believe serving subordinates could create a shared conviction and collectively promote the well-functioning of the organization (Collins & Smith, 2006; Vossaert et al., 2022).

In other words, FLMs' positive attitudes toward HR responsibilities, perceived behavioral control over HR enactment, and socially desirable expectations together stimulate them to willingly embrace HR duties as part of their identity. FLMs with high WTBF do not confine themselves to setting boundaries for their roles and responsibilities. Instead, they proactively engage in multiple HR tasks and display greater versatility (Beltrán-Martín et al., 2017; Parker et al., 1997; Solberg et al., 2021). While HPWS are assumed to support FLMs and further shape their positive perception, it is paramount to understand how this perception of enabling HR leads to implementation behaviors. In this light, FLMs with WTBF caused by perceived enabling HR, on the one hand, strive to meet the expectations over consistent HR enactment and, on the other hand, provide employees with individualized attention and support to show employees that they are valued and unique (Baard et al., 2004). Therefore, we propose that (please also see Figure 1):

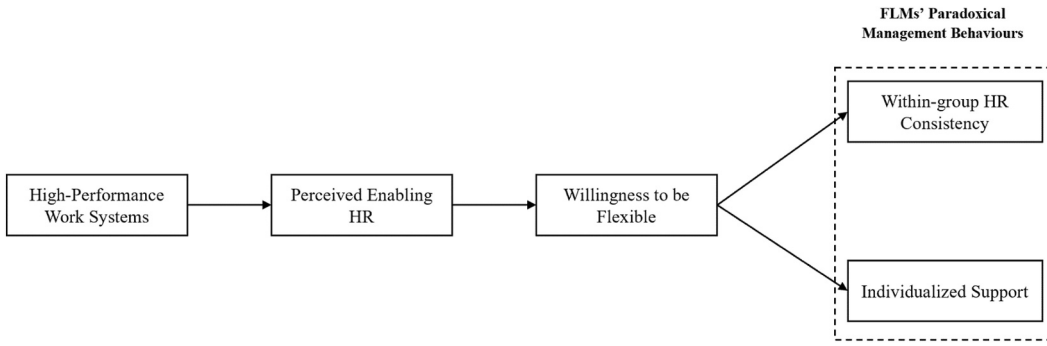

FIGURE 1 Research model.

H2 WTBF mediates the relationship between FLMs' perceived enabling HR and HR consistency.

H3 WTBF mediates the relationship between FLMs' perceived enabling HR and individualized support.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Participants and procedure

The data for this study was collected with questionnaires from a well-established private bank that is listed in the central bank of Iran and has a workforce of over 5000 employees in its payroll. This bank was recognized as one of the top 500 most valuable banks in the world by The Banker magazine. We deliberately chose the banking sector for this study because this industry has a tall structure and a high level of formality, with many FLMs in the organization, which is suitable for the study of the significance of FLMs' HR involvement. Before collecting the data, we held an in-depth interview with the company's HR director to ensure the consistency of their HR practices with the design principles of HPWS and to confirm that FLMs understand their HR roles and responsibilities. Participants received a cover letter with each questionnaire that explained the purpose of the study and ensured confidentiality. The completed questionnaires were returned in sealed envelopes provided by the researchers through mail or collected on-site by the researchers.

To alleviate common method bias, we attempted to separate the source of responses for each variable over two waves of time. This involved surveying FLMs and employees. In particular, FLMs are the recipient of HPWS, and employees are the receiving end of HR practices implemented by their supervisors (i.e., FLMs). To ensure the validity of our findings, the surveys were administered at two points in time, T1 and T2, with a 6-month interval. At T1, FLMs were asked to provide information regarding HPWS, perception of enabling HR, and their WTBF. At T2, employees under their supervision rated HR consistency and perceived individualized support. To match FLM and employees' responses, we asked survey participants to provide the name (ID code) of their respective teams. Every team in the bank of our study has a numerical ID code, labeled by the headquarters. With the approval of the senior HR, all 181 FLMs have been invited to participate in our study. As per every FLM, we invited three of their subordinates to rate their team managers' HR implementation behavior (i.e., HR consistency and individualized support). Of the overall 724 distributed questionnaires, 181 were returned from FLMs and 330 were from their employees. However, after matching and cleaning, 19 returned questionnaires of employees were discarded due to missing information, ending with 311 completed and valid questionnaires from employees, yielding an overall response rate of 67.9%. As for the FLMs composition, the average size of a team was 5.65. The FLM sample indicated an average age of 40.52 years, and average tenure was 13.5. Male respondents accounted for 71.3% of

the FLMs sample. 65.2% of FLMs had a master's degree, 2% Ph.D., and the rest have Bachelor's. As for the employees, Male respondents accounted for 51.3% of the employee sample. Employees had an average age of 30.03 years and an average organizational tenure of 4.36 years. Employees with a bachelor's degree compose the largest proportion of the sample (82.5%), and the average team size was 6.3.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | High-performance work systems

To measure HPWS, a 27-item scale was utilized, which was developed by Sun et al. (2007). The scale consists of 8 dimensions, including selective staffing, extensive training, internal mobility, employment security, clear job description, results-oriented appraisal, incentive reward, and participation. Respondents were asked to answer the survey questions on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.94, indicating high reliability.

3.2.2 | Willingness to be flexible

Willingness to be flexible was assessed using a 5-item scale developed by Solberg et al. (2021). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements regarding their WTBF to undertake multiple responsibilities on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For example, "I am willing to accept new tasks or responsibility areas if circumstances require it." The reliability of the scale was established with a high Cronbach's alpha score of 0.86.

3.2.3 | Perceived enabling HR

Perceived enabling HR was measured using a 5-item scale developed by Kuvaas et al. (2014). FLMs were asked to rate their agreement with statements such as "All in all, various HR tools and HR systems in my organization have increased my satisfaction with my managerial responsibilities." on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency of this measurement was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was 0.84 in this study.

3.2.4 | HR consistency

To measure HR consistency, a 15-item scale developed by Chen et al. (2016) was utilized. The employees were asked to rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). One example item is "The same management practices are applied to all employees with the same job positions." The Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.96.

3.2.5 | Individualized support

Individualized support was measured using four items from a scale developed by Rhoades et al. (2001). Sample items are "My supervisor cares about my opinions," "My supervisor cares about my well-being," "My supervisor

strongly considers my goals and values", and "My supervisor shows very little concern for me." The response format used a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

3.2.6 | Control variables

To control for potential confounding effects, we included several control variables in our analysis, including FLMs' tenure, age, and gender. FLMs' tenure was considered as it has been shown that those with more years of experience are more familiar with their HR responsibilities and better trained to perform them (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). Gender was recorded as a binary variable, where 1 represented male and 2 represented female. Tenure was categorized into five groups, ranging from 2 years or less to more than 11 years. As the correlation between age and tenure is very strong, we decided to exclude age from the current study.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Data aggregation

We aggregated the data on HR consistency and individualized support collected from individual employees (i.e., subordinates) to the team level. To ensure the appropriateness of the aggregated data, we calculated rwg values using a uniform distribution as the null distribution (James et al., 1984) and intra-class correlation coefficients (ICCs) (Bliese, 2000). The ICC(1) and ICC(2) values for the HR consistency are 0.23 and 0.61 respectively ($F = 6.55$, $p < 0.001$). The ICC(1) value of 0.23 is equivalent to a large effect (LeBreton & Senter, 2008). In addition, the ICC(2) value of 0.61 was above the cutoff value of 0.60 (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000) or falls into fair to good (Fleiss, 2011). Plus, The ICC(1) and ICC(2) values for the individualized support are 0.69 and 0.79 respectively ($F = 10.47$, $p < 0.001$). The rwg value for HR consistency and individualized support was 0.89 and 0.83 respectively, which fall into the level of strong agreement (LeBreton & Senter, 2008).

4.2 | Primary analysis

First, a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) was conducted in Smart-PLS to ensure the convergent and discriminant validity of variables. We assessed the empirics of multiple indicators for model comparison (Hu & Bentler, 1999): the root-mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). We used cut-off values as proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999) for good fit (RMSEA ≤ 0.06, CFI ≥ 0.95, SRMR ≤ 0.08) and acceptable fit (RMSEA ≤ 0.08, CFI ≥ 0.90, SRMR ≤ 0.10). As Table 1 presents, our proposed model is acceptable and a better fit to the data compared to alternative models.

Further, the reliability and validity of the variables used in the study were carefully assessed to ensure robust results. As indicated in Appendix A (please refer to Appendix A for detailed scale items), all the variables showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient higher than the minimum acceptable level of 0.7, indicating high reliability for the variables used in this study (Cavana et al., 2001). In addition, high factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) supported the convergent validity of the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The mean, standard deviation, and correlations are reported in Table 2.

TABLE 1 Comparison of measurement models.

Model	Model quality criteria						Evaluation of the structural part of the model				
	SRMR	D_ULS	D_G	Chi-square	NFI	RMS Theta	Q^2 Average	R^2 Average	F^2 Average	VIF Average	GOF
Five-factor model	0.150	0.336	0.079	64.46	0.855*	0.486	0.336	0.349	0.915	1.53	0.730
Four-factor model	0.185	0.511	0.342	223.01	0.497	0.486	0.248	0.258	0.367	1.34	0.589
Three-factor model	0.206	0.638	0.366	249.43	0.437	0.486	0.217	0.230	0.204	1.29	0.546
Two-factor model	0.261	1.027	0.432	276.73	0.375	0.486	0.217	0.189	0.209	1.23	0.482
One-factor model	0.275	1. 133	0.461	321.555	0.274	0.486	0.141	0.147	0.189	1.172	0.455

Note: SRMR < 0.12, VIF = 1/1-R^2, NFI > 0.80, Q^2 > 0, GOF > 0.366, F^2 Range > −0.35 (Strong), GOF = $\sqrt{}$ *Average* R^{2*} *Average VIF*. Five-factor model: High-performance work systems, Perceived enabling HR, Willingness to be flexible, HR consistency, Individualized support; Four-factor model: High-performance work systems + Perceived enabling HR, Willingness to be flexible, HR consistency, Individualized support; Three-factor model: High-performance work systems + Perceived enabling HR, Willingness to be flexible, Individualized support, + HR consistency; Two-factor model: High-performance work systems + Perceived enabling HR, Willingness to be flexible + Individualized support + HR consistency; One-Factor Model: High-performance work systems + Perceived enabling HR + Willingness to be flexible + Individualized support + HR consistency.

*$p < 0.05$.

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Tenure	5.92	2.94							
2. Gender	1.41	0.49	0.044						
3. HPWS	3.39	1.22	0.081	0.057					
4. Perceived enabling HR	3.51	1.18	0.100	0.033	0.449**				
5. WTBF	3.53	1.08	0.047	0.012	0.337**	0.344**			
6. HR consistency	3.09	1.02	0.019	0.099	0.397**	0.291*	0.175*		
7. Individualized support	3.80	1.08	−0.003	−0.046	0.300*	0.317**	0.501**	0.096	

Abbreviations: HPWS, high-performance work systems; WTBF, willingness to be flexible.

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

4.3 | Hypothesis testing

H1 predicts that FLMs' perceived enabling HR mediates the relationship between HPWS and WTBF. H2 and H3 predict that WTBF mediates the relationship between FLMs' perceived enabling HR and outcomes variables including HR consistency and individualized support. As Appendix A shows, our measurement of all variables satisfies required psychometric properties. Then, we employed the SmartPLS 3 software for PLS-SEM to analyze the model because we have a complex mediated model (i.e., two serial mediators) in this study. PLS-SEM facilitates the robust prediction of dependent variables (Hair et al., 2017), which makes PLS-SEM a suitable method for our analysis. The magnitude and significance of the path coefficients were used to assess the structural model. 5000

TABLE 3 Path coefficient and hypothesis results.

Paths	Path coefficient	t-value	*p*-value	Confidence interval 2.5%	Confidence interval 97.5%	Effect size (F^2)	R^2 Adjusted
H1: HPWS → FLMs' perceived enabling HR → WTBF	0.292*	6.581	0.000	0.197	0.385	0.630	0.217
H2: FLMs' perceived enabling HR → WTBF → HR consistency	0.117*	2.820	0.005	0.046	0.194	0.056	0.066
H3: FLMs' perceived enabling HR → WTBF → individualized support	0.402*	8.039	0.000	0.287	0.497	0.683	0.727
Serial mediation: HPWS → FLMs' perceived enabling HR → WTBF → HR consistency	0.072*	2.639	0.009	0.027	0.126	0.066	0.056
Serial mediation: HPWS → FLMs' perceived enabling HR → WTBF→Individualized support	0.245*	5.868	0.000	0.172	0.318	2.352	0.700

Note: $N_{FLMs} = 181$, $N_{employees} = 311$.

Abbreviations: FLMs, frontline managers; HPWS, high-performance work systems; WTBF, willingness to be flexible.

*$p < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

resamples were used for the bootstrapping procedure. As presented in Table 3, the results demonstrate that HPWS is positively and significantly related to WTBF through the FLMs' perceived enabling HR ($\beta = 0.292$, $t = 6.58$, $p = 0.000$), thus providing support for H1. In addition, the results show that WTBF mediates the relationship between FLMs' perceived enabling HR and HR consistency ($\beta = 0.117$, $t = 2.82$, $p = 0.005$). WTBF also mediates the relationship between FLMs' perceived enabling HR and individualized support to employees ($\beta = 0.153$, $t = 8.03$ $p = 0.000$). Therefore, H2 and H3 are both empirically supported.

To check the robustness of our findings, we also performed a mediation analysis test with a bootstrapped 95% confidence interval (CI) to test our hypotheses on the mediation effects. The HPWS's indirect effect on FLMs' WTBF through FLMs' perceived enabling HR was found significant (Effect size = 0.630, $\beta = 0.292$, 95% bootstrap CIs = [0.197, 0.385], not including zero). The indirect effect of FLMs' perceived enabling HR on HR consistency through WTBF was also significant (Effect size = 0.056, $\beta = 0.117$, 95% bootstrap CIs = [0.046, 0.194], not including zero). The indirect effect of FLMs' perceived enabling HR on individualized support to subordinates through WTBF was again significant and positive (Effect size = 0.683, $\beta = 0.402$, 95% bootstrap CIs = [0.287, 0.497], not including zero), which provides additional support for all the hypotheses proposed in this study.

Next, we examined the serial mediating effects of perceived enabling HR and WTBF between HPWS and our outcome variables (i.e., HR consistency and individualized support). The result of bootstrapping test indicates significant indirect effect of HPWS on HR consistency through two mediators (Effect size = 0.066, $\beta = 0.072$, 95% bootstrap CIs = [0.027, 0.126], not including zero). Moreover, our results also reveal significant indirect effect of HPWS on individualized support to employees through the sequential mediation of perceived enabling HR and WTBF (Effect size = 2.352, $\beta = 0.245$, 95% bootstrap CIs = [0.172, 0.318], not including zero).

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Receiving competing pressures for consistent and personalized implementation of HR is part of FLMs' normal working day (Fu et al., 2020; Kehoe & Han, 2020; Kou et al., 2022). Past research acknowledges that navigating paradoxical HR enactment—that is, conflicting, interrelated, and enduring, is vitally important for having an

effective HR system in practice, which largely depends on FLMs (Liao et al., 2016; Vossaert et al., 2022). Yet, how FLMs might be able to reconcile the tension between HR consistency and offering individualized support to subordinates remained unclear. In this study, drawing upon SET (Blau, 1964; Flynn, 2005) as the theoretical underpinning of our study, we proposed and empirically tested a model to explore how FLMs' perceived enabling HR and FLMs' WTBF link HPWS to the outcomes of interest: HR consistency and individualized support to employees.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Our findings contribute to the literature on SHRM and FLMs' HR implementation in several important ways. To begin with, looking at FLMs' HR role via the paradox perspective, we have revealed that for FLMs' to exhibit effective HR enactment, more than HR ability and dexterity is required. Past research has frequently introduced HPWS (i.e., AMO framework) as the core determinant of FLMs' HR implementation (Bos-Nehles, 2013; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022; Trullen et al., 2016), assuming that training and rewarding FLMs will guarantee HR consistency at the bottom line of the organization. However, this research stream only portrays half of the picture. We argue that examining FLMs' HR implementation to solely enhance consistency misleads us in preparing and capturing FLMs' HR involvement. In this study, we bring FLMs' paradoxical HR tasks to the surface of the devolution literature, which not only mirrors the reality and intricacy of FLMs' HR duties but also deepens our understanding of how to prepare FLMs for paradoxical HR implementation. Our shift in attention is a straightforward answer to very recent calls (Fu et al., 2020; Kehoe & Han, 2020; Vossaert et al., 2022), encouraging scholars to further explore how FLMs balance HR consistency and distinctiveness. Despite the valuable insights these scholars provided, current understanding of what comes before FLMs' paradoxical implementation behavior is far from complete.

While we do not downplay prior studies that utilize HPWS (e.g., training and rewarding) to assist FLMs with their implementation tasks, their conclusions, which disproportionately emphasize the technical preparation of FLMs for HR responsibilities, are subject to important criticisms. Against this backdrop, we argue that HPWS should make changes in FLMs' perceptions of HR and intentions to improve their involvement in personnel responsibilities. The construct of perceived enabling HR, triggered by HPWS, is different from FLMs' generic perception toward HR system. FLMs' perceived enabling HR implies that for FLMs, it is important to ensure that HR system has eyes on receiving employees' needs and values FLMs' managerial insight and leadership style in enacting HR. This is of significance because while some scholars argue that FLMs' have favorable perceptions regarding HR practices (i.e., HPWS), some others have shown that FLMs refrain from undertaking their HR responsibilities and believe that *HR is not my job* (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Harris et al., 2002; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022; Renwick, 2000). Against this background, our study goes beyond merely investigating FLMs' general perception of HPWS; FLMs need to ensure that embracing HR is not in conflict with their own managerial discreetness to care about employees' unique needs. Contrary to the view that FLMs are reluctant toward people management responsibilities, we posit that FLMs' are very sensitive to the people they oversee. However, before being involved in HR enactment, FLMs would evaluate the degree to which HR system is enabling, not limiting, and allowing them to factor in their subordinates' demands into their implementation behavior. Thus, our investigation of the mediating mechanisms of FLMs' perceived enabling HR between HPWS and FLMs' WTBF is a nuanced depiction of how HPWS should specifically change FLMs' perception regarding their enactment behavior. This is in line with the tenet of SET, arguing that individuals' received support and facilitation, make them feel indebted to compensate with favor in kind (Blau, 1964; Flynn, 2005). The insight we draw from this study is that when FLMs perceive HR as enabling and endorsing their personal leadership insights, they shape a positive cognitive evaluation toward the HR department intentions.

Moreover, our findings highlight that FLMs' WTBF links FLMs' perceived enabling HR to consistent implementation of HR and serving subordinates with personalized support. WTBF, if shaped and developed properly,

aids FLMs in understanding different aspects of their HR role, finding meaning and values behind their HR tasks, and thus contributing to HR implementation at a broader level. Our findings unveil that if the HR system triggers FLMs' WTBF, not only do FLMs not resist their HR responsibilities, but they also go above and beyond their call of duty and enact HR paradoxically. Our investigation of FLMs' WTBF as the linking path between FLMs' perceived enabling HR and their dual HR enactment behavior answers the recent call by Townsend et al. (2022), who propose that FLMs squeeze between the aspirations of an HR system and the reality of frontline workers' demands, encouraging further investigation in this direction. At this juncture, we found that if FLMs' perception of HR triggers their WTBF, they would enact HR equally while making exceptions and supporting their employees. Though we didn't*t* test it explicitly, the opposite might be true: if FLMs do not develop WTBF, they may polarize either toward consistency or toward serving employees with individualized support, which is far from our expectations of effective HR implementation behaviors. Within Flynn's generalized exchange theory (2005), one is likely to return favors received from their organizations (i.e., HR departments) to other people within those organizations (i.e., subordinates). In other words, FLMs display attention and support to subordinates in return for what they have received from the organization (Chang et al., 2020). This is because serving subordinates with individualized attention is believed to contribute to achieving the objectives of the organization. In this sense, WTBF, which measures FLMs' willingness to accept seemingly competing roles, allows FLMs to reciprocate the HR department support and attention by consistent HR enactment while paying idiosyncratic attention to subordinates, who are significant to their immediate managers and can collectively improve the organization performance.

5.2 | Practical implications

The findings of this study can have important implications for practitioners. Firms, in general, and HR professionals, in particular, should be careful about delivering HR policies and practices such as HPWS to FLMs. HR practitioners should enhance FLMs' HR knowledge and dexterity while ensuring they are not overwhelmed with the pressure for consistency and performance. Upper-echelon HR practitioners should be cautious that FLMs are also recipients of HR services, and any false signal might negatively influence FLMs' perception of HR system. We also remind HR managers and experts that flexibility does not lie in the HR system by itself. Flexible HR implementation, to a large extent, hinges on FLMs' choices. FLMs, as micro and meso-level HR actors, may withdraw or elude from their HR responsibilities if they perceive HR systems as exploitative or limiting. Further, HR professionals should also be aware that excessive emphasis on HPWS to empower FLMs may not always be practical. HPWS are goal-oriented and focus on different motivators, which can limit FLMs' ability to provide individualized support to employees. FLMs' willingness and flexibility in their HR role should be cultivated and valued by enabling HR to address this issue.

Moreover, FLMs should be encouraged to respect individual employees' needs while consistently implementing HR practices. Over-relying on either aspect of their paradoxical roles will lead to less effective HR implementation. FLMs need to understand the philosophy behind HR policies and become aware of the organization's expectations for consistency and responsiveness toward employees. Despite the recognition of the importance of FLMs' HR responsibilities, there has been a lack of focus on how to align their HR role with business objectives and address the paradoxical demands of HR consistency and individual responsiveness (Lepak & Snell, 1999; McGovern et al., 1997). FLMs are in particular prone to experience role pressure and stress in dealing with HR tasks along with their operational unit goals. This stress and role ambiguity might be coupled when they face paradoxical HR tasks. Nevertheless, an FLM equipped with sufficient HR competency, flexibility, willingness, and a high responsibility toward subordinates can alternate between various conflicting tasks and meet dual expectations from subordinates and upper-level management. The HR department should convince FLMs that they both care about HR consistency

in general and value and encourage FLMs' particular attention to their subordinates. Otherwise, FLMs would not execute HR tasks wholeheartedly, or their HR involvement might backfire.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

This study provides valuable insights for practitioners but should be viewed with several limitations in mind. We deliberately focused on the banking sector because this industry has a tall structure and a high level of formality, as well as many managers at the bottom levels of their organization, suitable for the study of the significance of FLMs' HR contribution. However, the results may not be generalizable to other sectors and should be interpreted with caution. We should also note that in this study, we collected Time 2 data after a six-month interval. The main reason behind this is that in the bank of our study, middle and branch managers were assigned to evaluate employees under their supervision every three months in specific tasks and again rate employees' contribution to teams' goal achievements every 6 months to distribute rewards and performance-based bonuses. In addition, branch managers were responsible for training and coaching employees in delegating tasks and then rotating them to new positions every 6 months. In this sense, a 6-month period was the most suitable time span for employees to have a realistic appraisal of their FLMs. However, other contingency factors might intervene during the 6 months which merit further investigation in future research.

Additionally, while the study attempted to draw on FLMs' perception and flexibility, capturing FLMs' inner motivation and identity for HR tasks still matters. Hence, exploring more intrinsic variables that guarantee FLMs' HR involvement and effective implementation behaviors is a fruitful avenue. Next, while we found evidence for the influence of HPWS on FLMs' perception of enabling HR, sense of flexibility, and their subsequent HR behavior, future research can examine the HR system with team climate and social influences from the subordinates as other contingency factors to strengthen our research model. In other words, empirically exploring the concurrent effect of top-down influences from the HR department and bottom-up signals from subordinates on FLMs' implementation behaviors can be a valuable extension. Moreover, HR practices constitute a consistent system that includes additive and interactive effects. When different HR practices are used in combination, they can be mutually reinforcing and able to generate superior organizational performance (Huang et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2007). In measuring HPWS in this study, we followed previous research practice to assess HPWS as a bundled of HR practices but only for their additive effects, not considering their interactive effects, in order to stay focused on the main mechanism from HPWS to enabling HR to WBTF, and to employee outcomes (i.e., Consistency and individualized support). It is urged that future research on HPWS and other HR policies should explore their two-way or even three-way interactions among different HR practices to see if different combinations have different impact on employee behaviors and performance, which is also a fruitful research avenue. In addition, it is also possible to adopt the fit theory to explore how a fit between delivering consistent HR practices across the organization and providing individualized supervisor support can maximize FLMs' HR performance, a potential fruitful research area (Yao & Ma, 2022). As a final thought, we only shed light on the paradoxes of consistency and individualized support in this study. Future endeavors can identify other critical paradoxes in FLMs' HR role that might influence their HR performance because studies in this field require more empirical substantiations.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Jongwook Pak https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4839-0023
Hossein Heidarian Ghaleh https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4560-7902
Zhenzhong Ma https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3012-2810
Muhammad Naseer Akhtar https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7488-7957

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APPENDIX A

Survey items		EFA		CFA				
		Factor loading	Total variance extracted	Factor loadings (β & T)	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha	VIF
High-performance work systems								
Selective staffing	Great effort is taken to select the right person.	0.826	14.55	0.742 (22.17)	0.80	0.92	0.87	2.47
	Long-term employee potential is emphasized.	0.885						
	Considerable importance is placed on the staffing process	0.906						
	Very extensive efforts are made in selection	0.866						
Training	Extensive training programs are provided for individuals in customer contact or frontline jobs	0.891	13.63	0.667 (16.77)				
	Employees in customer contact jobs will normally go through training programs every few years	0.868						
	There are formal training programs to teach new hires the skills they need to perform their job.	0.884						
	Formal training programs are offered to employees in order to increase their promotability in this organization	0.920						
Internal mobility	Employees have few opportunities for upward mobility	0.858	12.28	0.628 (14.23)				
	Employees do not have any future in this organization	0.864						
	Promotion in this organization is based on seniority	0.834						
	Employees have clear career paths in this organization.	0.871						

(Continued)

Survey items		EFA Factor loading	EFA Total variance extracted	CFA Factor loadings (β & T)	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha	VIF
	Employees in customer contact jobs who desire promotion have more than one potential position they could be promoted to	0.822						
Job security	Employees in this job can be expected to stay with this organization for as long as they wish.	0.866	12.16	0.602 (13.28)				
	Job security is almost guaranteed to employees in this job.	0.853						
Job description	The duties in this job are clearly defined	0.847	11.83	0.659 (16.43)				
	This job has an up-to-date description	0.881						
	The job description for a position accurately describes all of the duties performed by individual employees	0.891						
Performance oriented appraisal	Performance is more often measured with objective quantifiable results.	0.822	7.95	0.663 (17.15)				
	Performance appraisals are based on objective quantifiable results	0.892						
	Employee appraisals emphasize long term and group-based achievement	0.886						
Incentive rewards	Individuals in this job receive bonuses based on the profit of the organization	0.824	6.13	0.580 (12.49)				
	Close tie or matching of pay to individual/group performance	0.916						
Participation	Employees in this job are often asked by their supervisor to participate in decisions	0.926	2.058	0.620 (15.17)				
	Individuals in this job are allowed to make decisions.	0.893						
	Employees are provided the opportunity to suggest improvements in the way things are done	0.877						

(Continues)

(Continued)

Survey items	EFA		CFA				
	Factor loading	Total variance extracted	Factor loadings (β & T)	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha	VIF
Supervisors keep open communications with employees in this job.	0.875						
Perceived enabling HR							
All in all, the various HR tools and HR systems in my organization are adjusted to the local and specific needs I have as a leader when it comes to getting the "best" out of my employees.	0.879	78.27	0.911 (68.59)	0.78	0.94	0.93	3.18
All in all, the various HR tools and HR systems in my organization are flexible enough to be adapted to my personal leadership style.	0.806		0.887 (64.06)				
All in all, the various HR tools and HR systems in my organization are flexible enough to be adapted to the individual needs of my employees.	0.977		0.886 (49.99)				
All in all, the various HR tools and systems in my organization help me perform my leadership duties in a successful way.	0.876		0.859 (43.10)				
All in all, the various HR tools and HR systems in my organization have increased my satisfaction with my managerial responsibilities.	0.792		0.880 (47.78)				
Willingness to be flexible							
If there is no longer a need for what I do today, I am willing to take on new work tasks	0.885	76.09	0.860 (44.14)	0.76	0.94	0.92	3.18
I am willing to do things differently than usual, if my leader or the organization wants it	0.900		0.907 (70.26)				
If we are organized in another way, I am willing to work with other tasks than I do today	0.835		0.878 (57.00)				
If we get new technologies/IT solutions, I am willing to adapt my way of working to them	0.886		0.876 (49.52)				

(Continued)

Survey items		EFA Factor loading	EFA Total variance extracted	CFA Factor loadings (β & T)	CFA AVE	CFA CR	CFA Cronbach's alpha	CFA VIF
I am willing to accept new tasks or responsibility areas if circumstances require it		0.796		0.839 (35.80)				
HR consistency								
Treatment consistency	Employees have equal internal opportunities for promotion	0.536	36.18	0.747 (22.24)	0.74	0.93	0.91	2.7
	The same management practices are applied to all employees with the same job positions	0.578						
	The same reward and penalty policies are applied to all employees	0.523						
	Employees get the rewards that they deserve	0.561						
	All employees have equal opportunities	0.724						
Temporal consistency	Employees worry that management might change policies someday (reverse).	0.795	23.88	0.806 (26.61)				
	The management's philosophy has not changed since I started working for this company	0.661						
	In general, this company has maintained good management policies and systems	0.896						
	Overall, the HR systems and policies in this company are predictable.	0.886						
	The recruitment and selection system are complemented by HR planning. Complementary consistency	0.870						
Complementary consistency	The training system is complemented by promotion policies.	0.858	16.46	0.771 (26.63)				
	The reward and compensation system is complemented by performance appraisal policies	0.893						

(Continues)

(Continued)

Survey items		EFA		CFA				
		Factor loading	Total variance extracted	Factor loadings (β & T)	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha	VIF
	The promotion system is complemented by performance appraisal policies	0.889						
	The reward and penalty system is complemented by internal audit policies	0.874						
	Overall, the philosophy of each HR system is consistent with the others.	0.861						
Individualized support								
My supervisor cares about my opinions		0.845	74.71	0.864 (36.59)	0.78	0.935	0.90	2.9
My supervisor cares about my well-being		0.874		0.889 (53.48)				
My supervisor strongly considers my goals and values		0.888		0.925 (95.61)				
My supervisor shows very little concern for me (reverse)		0.830		0.857 (34.94)				