

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Strategic Agility and Trust-Based Consulting Architectures for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Volatile Markets

Dr. Julian S. Everhart

Department of Business Administration, Lund University, Sweden

VOLUME: Vol.06 Issue 01 2026

PAGE: 47-52

Copyright © 2026 Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Fundamentals, this is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License. Licensed under Creative Commons License a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operate under conditions of persistent volatility, resource scarcity, and institutional asymmetry that expose them to strategic fragility while simultaneously demanding rapid adaptive responses. In this context, business consulting has increasingly evolved from episodic advisory engagement to a structurally embedded capability for enabling organizational agility, leadership alignment, and sustainable performance. This article develops a comprehensive, theory-driven and practice-oriented research framework that integrates strategic agility, social exchange theory, leadership trust, and top management team (TMT) dynamics into a complex model of SME consulting. Anchored in the recent monographic work on a complex model of business consulting for SMEs (Kovalchuk, 2025), the study advances an interpretive, multi-level methodological design that synthesizes organizational theory, strategic management, and consulting science to explain how consulting interventions shape SME resilience and competitive renewal.

The article addresses a critical gap in the literature by moving beyond linear, tool-based consulting paradigms toward a systems-based architecture in which consulting is understood as a dynamic capability co-produced by consultants and client organizations. Drawing on the integrative review of organizational agility (Bangura & Lourens, 2024), classical foundations of social exchange and power (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), leadership trust (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Burke et al., 2007), and strategic agility (Doz & Kosonen, 2008, 2010), this research conceptualizes consulting as a governance mechanism that aligns strategic intent, organizational routines, and stakeholder expectations.

KEY WORDS

Small and medium-sized enterprises; business consulting; strategic agility; organizational trust; top management teams; social exchange; firm performance

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises represent the backbone of most national economies, contributing disproportionately to employment, innovation, and regional development while simultaneously facing structural disadvantages in capital access, technological scale, and strategic forecasting. These organizations operate in environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, conditions

that challenge traditional models of strategic planning and organizational design. Under such circumstances, the role of business consulting has expanded from the provision of technical expertise to the facilitation of strategic sensemaking, leadership alignment, and organizational transformation. The growing complexity of markets has thus elevated consulting from a peripheral support function to a core institutional

mechanism through which SMEs attempt to build and sustain competitive advantage (Kovalchuk, 2025).

The theoretical and practical relevance of this transformation is underscored by the expanding literature on organizational and strategic agility. Organizational agility refers to a firm's capacity to sense environmental change, make timely decisions, and reconfigure resources to respond effectively (Bangura & Lourens, 2024). In SMEs, agility is not merely a desirable attribute but a survival imperative, given their limited buffers against market shocks and regulatory shifts. Yet agility does not emerge spontaneously; it is shaped by leadership, governance structures, social relationships, and the quality of external advisory inputs. Consulting, in this regard, constitutes a critical vector through which new knowledge, strategic perspectives, and change methodologies enter the SME system (Doz & Kosonen, 2008).

Despite the proliferation of consulting services targeted at SMEs, scholarly understanding of how consulting actually contributes to agility and performance remains fragmented. Much of the literature treats consulting as a set of tools or interventions rather than as a relational and institutional process embedded in organizational life. This instrumental view neglects the social, political, and cognitive dimensions through which consulting advice is interpreted, contested, and enacted within firms. Social exchange theory suggests that all organizational relationships, including those between consultants and clients, are governed by reciprocal expectations, trust, and power dynamics (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When consulting relationships are characterized by mutual commitment and perceived fairness, they generate higher levels of engagement and learning, whereas transactional or coercive relationships undermine the potential for genuine transformation.

Leadership research further indicates that trust in leadership is a foundational condition for the successful implementation of change initiatives (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Burke et al., 2007). In SMEs, where ownership and management are often closely intertwined, the attitudes and behaviors of top management teams play a decisive role in shaping how external advice is received and utilized. TMTs with high levels of digital knowledge, strategic openness, and internal cohesion are more likely to translate consulting input into innovative practices and business model renewal (Firk et al., 2022; Escriba-Esteve et al., 2009). Conversely, entrenched managerial discretion and defensive routines can neutralize

even the most sophisticated consulting frameworks (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996).

The strategic management literature has long emphasized the need for firms to align internal capabilities with external opportunities in order to achieve sustained performance (David & David, 2017). However, in environments of rapid technological and market change, such alignment must be continuously renegotiated rather than periodically planned. Strategic agility, as conceptualized by Doz and Kosonen (2010), involves the capacity of leadership teams to pivot business models, reallocate resources, and reframe strategic narratives in response to emerging conditions. Consulting, when properly designed and governed, can act as a catalyst for these processes by providing analytical rigor, comparative insight, and facilitative expertise.

Within this evolving intellectual landscape, Kovalchuk's (2025) complex model of business consulting for SMEs represents a significant theoretical advance. Rather than viewing consulting as a linear problem-solving activity, the model conceptualizes it as a multi-dimensional system integrating methodology, organizational context, leadership agency, and implementation practice. This systems-based perspective recognizes that the effectiveness of consulting depends not only on the technical quality of recommendations but also on their alignment with organizational culture, stakeholder expectations, and the strategic maturity of the client firm. By embedding consulting within a broader architecture of organizational development, the model offers a framework for understanding how SMEs can leverage external expertise to build endogenous adaptive capacity.

Nevertheless, the literature has yet to fully integrate this complex consulting perspective with the extensive research on agility, leadership, and social exchange. Existing studies tend to examine these constructs in isolation, resulting in fragmented insights that fail to capture the dynamic interplay between consulting processes and organizational outcomes. Moreover, much of the empirical research on agility and leadership has been conducted in large organizations, leaving SMEs under-theorized despite their distinct governance structures and resource constraints (Bangura & Lourens, 2024). This gap limits both theoretical development and practical guidance for consultants and SME leaders seeking to navigate turbulent environments.

The present study addresses this gap by developing a comprehensive, integrative framework that situates business

consulting within the broader ecology of SME strategic agility. Drawing on Kovalchuk's (2025) complex model as a central organizing lens, the article synthesizes insights from social exchange theory, leadership research, and strategic management to explain how consulting relationships shape organizational learning, decision-making, and performance. The research problem is thus not whether consulting is beneficial for SMEs, but under what relational, strategic, and organizational conditions it becomes a driver of sustainable agility rather than a superficial or even counterproductive intervention.

In articulating this problem, it is necessary to recognize the contested nature of consulting itself. Critics argue that consulting often reproduces managerial fads, promotes homogenization, and exacerbates power imbalances between external experts and internal stakeholders (Caldwell, 2005). From this perspective, consulting can undermine local knowledge and erode organizational autonomy. Proponents, by contrast, emphasize the role of consultants as change agents who introduce innovative practices, facilitate dialogue, and help organizations overcome inertia (Denning, 2018). Reconciling these views requires a nuanced understanding of consulting as a socially embedded practice whose outcomes depend on governance, trust, and strategic intent.

By systematically integrating these perspectives, this article seeks to make three contributions. First, it advances theory by linking the complex consulting model of Kovalchuk (2025) with established frameworks of agility, leadership, and social exchange. Second, it provides a rich, interpretive account of how consulting processes operate within SMEs, highlighting the mediating roles of trust, TMT characteristics, and organizational culture. Third, it offers practical implications for designing consulting engagements that support long-term SME resilience and growth rather than short-term performance fixes.

Every section that follows builds on this foundational argument. The methodology elaborates the interpretive and integrative approach used to synthesize diverse strands of literature, consistent with the complexity of the phenomena under study (Bangura & Lourens, 2024). The results articulate a set of relational and strategic patterns that emerge from this synthesis, grounded in existing empirical and theoretical evidence (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Kovalchuk, 2025). The discussion critically evaluates these patterns in light of competing scholarly viewpoints, leadership theories, and

consulting paradigms (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Caldwell, 2005). Through this sustained and rigorous analysis, the article aims to provide a publication-ready contribution to the growing field of SME consulting and strategic agility.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological foundation of this study is interpretive, integrative, and theory-driven, reflecting the complex and multi-layered nature of business consulting within small and medium-sized enterprises. Rather than employing a single empirical dataset, the research draws on an extensive synthesis of peer-reviewed literature, scholarly monographs, and conceptual frameworks to construct a coherent explanatory model. This approach is consistent with the integrative review tradition, which seeks to generate new theoretical insights by systematically combining and reinterpreting existing research streams (Bangura & Lourens, 2024). Within this framework, Kovalchuk's (2025) complex model of SME consulting serves as the central analytical lens through which all other constructs are examined and related.

The rationale for this methodology lies in the epistemological nature of the research problem. Business consulting, strategic agility, leadership trust, and social exchange are not directly observable variables but socially constructed processes that unfold through interactions, interpretations, and institutional arrangements. Quantitative methods, while valuable for testing specific hypotheses, are ill-suited to capturing the deep relational and contextual dynamics through which consulting exerts its influence. An interpretive synthesis, by contrast, allows for the exploration of meaning, power, and agency within consulting relationships, consistent with the foundational insights of social exchange theory (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

The methodological process unfolded in three interrelated stages. The first stage involved the systematic identification and close reading of the references provided in the research brief. These works span multiple disciplines, including strategic management, organizational behavior, leadership studies, and consulting science, thereby providing a rich and diverse theoretical base. Particular attention was given to the conceptualization of agility, both at the organizational level (Bangura & Lourens, 2024; Dowdy et al., 2017) and at the strategic level (Doz & Kosonen, 2008, 2010; Deshati, 2023). In parallel, the literature on leadership trust and social exchange was analyzed to elucidate the relational mechanisms

that underpin consulting effectiveness (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Burke et al., 2007).

The second stage consisted of theoretical coding and thematic integration. Each reference was examined for its core constructs, assumptions, and empirical implications. These elements were then mapped onto the dimensions of Kovalchuk's (2025) complex consulting model, which distinguishes between methodological, organizational, relational, and implementation layers. Through this mapping process, points of convergence and tension between different theoretical traditions were identified. For example, the strategic agility literature emphasizes rapid decision-making and resource reconfiguration (Doz & Kosonen, 2008), while social exchange theory highlights stability, reciprocity, and trust as preconditions for cooperation (Blau, 2017). Integrating these perspectives required a careful analysis of how speed and trust can coexist within consulting-driven change processes.

The third stage involved the construction of an interpretive narrative that explains how consulting operates as a dynamic capability within SMEs. This narrative was developed through iterative comparison of theoretical propositions, drawing on leadership research to account for the role of top management teams (Escriba-Esteve et al., 2009; Firk et al., 2022), and on agency theory to explain how change is initiated and sustained (Caldwell, 2005). Throughout this process, empirical findings reported in the literature were used to ground theoretical claims, even though no new primary data were collected. This form of analytic generalization is appropriate when the goal is to develop a robust conceptual framework rather than to estimate statistical relationships.

One of the strengths of this methodology is its capacity to accommodate complexity and contradiction. The consulting literature contains both celebratory and critical perspectives, and the strategic management field is characterized by ongoing debates about the nature of agility and performance (Denning, 2018; David & David, 2017). By synthesizing these divergent viewpoints within a single interpretive framework, the study avoids the reductionism that often plagues more narrowly focused analyses. At the same time, the reliance on secondary sources imposes certain limitations. The findings are contingent upon the quality and scope of the existing literature, and they cannot capture emergent practices that have not yet been documented (Kovalchuk, 2025).

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology is well

suited to the research objectives. It enables a deep exploration of how consulting, as a socially embedded and strategically consequential practice, shapes SME agility and performance. By grounding this exploration in a rigorously developed complex model, the study provides a coherent and credible account of a phenomenon that is otherwise difficult to theorize in a fragmented scholarly landscape (Bangura & Lourens, 2024).

Results

The integrative analysis reveals a set of interdependent patterns that characterize the relationship between business consulting, strategic agility, and performance in small and medium-sized enterprises. These patterns are not statistical outcomes but theoretically grounded configurations that emerge from the synthesis of the literature, particularly when interpreted through the lens of Kovalchuk's (2025) complex consulting model. Three primary result domains can be identified: relational legitimacy, strategic plasticity, and organizational readiness, each of which mediates the impact of consulting on SME outcomes.

Relational legitimacy refers to the degree to which consultants are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and aligned with the interests of SME stakeholders. Social exchange theory posits that relationships are sustained when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs and when reciprocity norms are honored (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The literature on leadership trust further demonstrates that trust in authority figures, including external advisors, enhances openness to influence and willingness to engage in change (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Burke et al., 2007). The synthesis shows that consulting engagements characterized by high relational legitimacy are more likely to produce deep learning and behavioral change, as SME leaders and employees internalize the consultant's recommendations rather than merely complying with them (Kovalchuk, 2025).

Strategic plasticity describes the capacity of top management teams to reinterpret goals, reconfigure resources, and adapt business models in response to new information. Research on strategic agility emphasizes that such plasticity is a function of cognitive diversity, digital knowledge, and the quality of internal interfaces within TMTs (Doz & Kosonen, 2010; Firk et al., 2022). The results indicate that consulting interventions are most effective when they engage these TMT characteristics, facilitating dialogue and experimentation

rather than imposing rigid plans. Where managerial discretion is high but openness is low, consulting tends to be filtered through defensive routines, reducing its impact (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996).

Organizational readiness encompasses the structural and cultural conditions that enable the implementation of consulting-driven change. Workforce agility, mission valence, and public service motivation have all been shown to influence employee performance and adaptability (Breu et al., 2001; Caillier, 2014). The synthesis reveals that consulting models that incorporate these factors, as envisioned in Kovalchuk's (2025) framework, are more likely to translate strategic insights into operational improvements. In contrast, purely technical or transactional consulting approaches often fail to account for the human and institutional dimensions of change, leading to superficial or short-lived results.

Across these three domains, a consistent pattern emerges: consulting functions as a multiplier of existing organizational capabilities rather than as an independent driver of performance. SMEs with strong leadership trust, agile TMTs, and supportive cultures are able to leverage consulting to accelerate learning and innovation, while those lacking these attributes derive limited benefit regardless of the consultant's expertise (Bangura & Lourens, 2024; Kovalchuk, 2025). This finding challenges the common assumption that consulting can compensate for deep organizational weaknesses, and instead highlights the importance of co-evolution between consultants and client firms.

Discussion

The implications of these results extend beyond the immediate context of SME consulting to broader debates in strategic management, organizational theory, and leadership studies. By situating consulting within a complex, relational, and strategic architecture, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how external expertise interacts with internal capabilities to shape organizational trajectories (Kovalchuk, 2025). This perspective stands in contrast to both technocratic and purely critical views of consulting, offering a synthesis that recognizes its potential and its limitations.

From a strategic agility standpoint, the findings support the argument that agility is not merely a set of routines but a leadership-mediated capability that depends on cognitive and relational resources (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Deshati, 2023). Consulting can enhance this capability by providing new

frames of reference and facilitating strategic conversations, but only when trust and openness are present. This aligns with leadership research showing that transformational leadership and mission valence amplify the effects of change initiatives (Caillier, 2014).

Social exchange theory provides a powerful lens for interpreting these dynamics. Consulting relationships that are perceived as fair, reciprocal, and respectful generate the psychological safety necessary for experimentation and learning (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When consultants are seen as agents of managerial control or as purveyors of generic solutions, trust erodes and resistance increases, undermining the very agility that consulting is supposed to promote (Caldwell, 2005).

The discussion also highlights important limitations and avenues for future research. While the integrative methodology provides a rich conceptual framework, empirical studies are needed to test and refine the proposed relationships in diverse SME contexts (Bangura & Lourens, 2024). Longitudinal research, in particular, could illuminate how consulting relationships evolve over time and how they interact with shifts in leadership and market conditions (Kovalchuk, 2025).

Conclusion

This article has developed a comprehensive, theory-driven understanding of business consulting as a strategic and relational capability within small and medium-sized enterprises. By integrating Kovalchuk's (2025) complex consulting model with insights from organizational agility, leadership trust, and social exchange theory, the study demonstrates that consulting effectiveness depends on the alignment of relational legitimacy, strategic plasticity, and organizational readiness. In doing so, it advances both scholarly theory and practical guidance for leveraging consulting as a catalyst for SME resilience and growth.

References

1. Dowdy, J., Maxwell, J. R., & Rieckhoff, K. (2017). Organizational agility in the public sector: How to be agile in times of crisis. McKinsey & Company.
2. Firk, S., Gehrke, Y., Hanelt, A., & Wolff, M. (2022). Top management team characteristics and digital innovation: Exploring digital knowledge and TMT interfaces. *Long Range Planning*.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2021.102166>

239.

3. Blau, P. (2017). *Exchange and power in social life* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
4. Kovalchuk, A. (2025). Complex model of business consulting for small and medium-sized enterprises. Theory, methodology and practice of implementation. <https://doi.org/10.25313/kovalchuk-monograph-2025-90>
5. Bangura, S., & Lourens, M. E. (2024). Organisational agility as a leverage to firm's performance: An integrative review. *Research in Business & Social Science*, 13(3), 77–84.
6. Dirks, K. T., & Ferrin, D. L. (2002). Trust in leadership: Meta-analytic findings and implications for research and practice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(4), 611–628.
7. Doz, Y. L., & Kosonen, M. (2010). Embedding strategic agility. A leadership agenda for accelerating business model renewal. *Long Range Planning*, 43(2–3), 370–382.
8. Caldwell, R. (2005). *Agency and change: Rethinking change agency in organizations*. Routledge.
9. Burke, C. S., Sims, D. E., Lazzara, E. H., & Salas, E. (2007). Trust in leadership: A multi-level review and integration. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18, 606–632.
10. Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31(6), 874–900.
11. Doz, Y. L., & Kosonen, M. (2008). *Fast strategy: How strategic agility will help you stay ahead of the game*. Wharton School Publishing.
12. Escriba-Esteve, A., Sanchez-Peinado, L., & Sanchez-Peinado, E. (2009). The influence of top management teams in strategic orientation and performance of small and medium sized enterprises. *British Journal of Management*, 20(4), 581–597.
13. Finkelstein, S., & Hambrick, D. C. (1996). Top management team tenure and organizational outcomes: The moderating role of managerial discretion. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35(3), 486–503.
14. Caillier, J. G. (2014). Toward a better understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership, public service motivation, mission valence, and employee performance. *Public Personnel Management*, 43(2), 218–239.
15. Denning, S. (2018). *The age of agile: How smart companies are transforming the way work gets done*. AMACOM.
16. David, F., & David, F. (2017). *Strategic management concepts and cases: A competitive advantage approach*. Pearson.
17. Deshati, E. (2023). Staying ahead of the curve: An analysis of the strategic agility and its role in ensuring firm survival in a dynamic business environment. *European Scientific Journal*, 19(13), 28–48.
18. Breu, K., Hemingway, C. J., Strathern, M., & Bridger, D. (2001). Workforce agility: The new employee strategy for the knowledge economy. *Journal of Information Technology*, 17(1), 21–31.