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Drawing on organizational aspiration theory and upper echelons theory, we examine how managerial ability influences the ESG performance–aspiration gap using Chinese A-share listed firms from 2012–2023. Results show that managerial ability significantly mitigates ESG aspiration gaps, with a one-standard-deviation increase reducing the gap by 57%. This effect operates through two mechanisms: alleviating financing constraints and improving internal expectations. The mitigating effect is stronger in firms with high equity incentives, substantial institutional ownership, and elevated public attention. Further analysis reveals that managerial ability buffers the negative impact of ESG aspiration gaps on trade credit, primarily through supplier channels. These findings extend organizational aspiration theory to ESG contexts and provide actionable insights for corporate governance and supply chain management.

Key words: managerial ability, ESG aspiration gap, financing constraints, internal expectations

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