



## Analytical review of sustainable leadership concept

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### Abstract

*Sustainable leadership is becoming increasingly important in the contemporary business context, as there is a growing emphasis on environmental protection, social responsibility, and the long-term success of organizations. This concept originates from the idea that organizations do not exist in isolation but are closely interconnected with the natural environment and the society in which they operate. Sustainable leadership recognizes the significant role of organizations in preserving the environment and the overall social well-being and promotes their actions in accordance with the principles of environmental conservation and the well-being of all stakeholders. This research analyzes the concepts of sustainable leadership at the individual, organizational, and integrated levels. The primary goal of the paper was to gain a deeper understanding of the key elements and characteristics that make sustainable leadership successful and effective. Through a review of relevant literature, various aspects of sustainable leadership at each of these levels were considered to create a comprehensive picture of this important topic.*

**Keywords:** sustainability, sustainable leadership, social responsibility

## 1. Introduction

The initial calls for sustainable development originated from concerned ecologists and social/public leaders (Carson, 1962), who envisioned sustainability as a desirable utopian "ultimate goal," while the business community was perceived as the main threat to this desired state, putting it in a defensive position. In the following years, sustainability has been increasingly defined as a process of change in which business organizations gradually became involved. The definition of sustainability has evolved from "a problem to be solved" to "a future to be created" (Senge, et al., 2008). When the bubble of financial capitalism burst in 2008, prominent business leaders began to question the wisdom of the status quo. With growing environmental issues, a resource crisis, and an economic crisis in the background, the creative search for sustainable economic models intensified.

A perspective of leadership from a sustainability standpoint is based on the idea that organizations are part of the natural world, and as such, they should create sustainable value based on knowledge and resources generation while also taking care of society, the environment, and ethical principles. Sustainability and sustainable leadership issues are always linked to the "triple bottom line" perspective (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999), which indicates that social, environmental, and financial indicators are methods for balancing an organization's business performance. Accordingly, the concept of sustainable leadership is grounded in the importance and impacts of sustainable practices, advocating the idea that organizations need to shift their focus from the traditional single-minded financial orientation to their contribution to broader ecological and social impacts that exist (Casserley & Critchley, 2010; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a).

Avery (2005) is credited with pioneering the concept of sustainable leadership in the realm of organizational management. Her work is rooted in a comparative analysis of two models of capitalism - British and American - as well as the Rhine model, aimed at exploring their impact on the leadership style of managers within organizations. In her research, she pinpointed 19 pivotal elements of sustainable leadership linked to the capacity for long-term decision-making, the promotion of systematic innovation, the cultivation of loyal teams of employees, and the delivery of high-quality products,

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services, and solutions. Sustainable leadership, as per the author's perspective, aspires to strike an equilibrium between the interests of people, profit, and the planet, championing organizational sustainability through appropriate management practices. These practices encompass management systems, principles, processes, and values, which collectively can forge a self-reinforcing leadership system within the organization. Sustainable leadership strives to construct enduring organizational sustainability through a well-balanced approach to people, profit, and the planet, anchoring itself in innovation, integrity, and social responsibility.

Subsequently, this framework underwent expansion to encompass 23 practices, organized in the configuration of a pyramid that mirrors mutual support and interdependence (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a). The foundational practices constitute the base of the pyramid and encompass 14 core activities, including the continuous development of every employee within the organization, a commitment to fostering collaborative relationships with employees, the adoption of a long-term perspective, and the assumption of a broad spectrum of responsibilities toward stakeholders. High-level practices occupy the second tier of the pyramid and embrace the creation of self-managing employees, the harnessing of team dynamics, and the dissemination of knowledge. Performance drivers are situated on the third stratum of the pyramid and encompass innovation, emotional engagement, and a commitment to delivering high quality, which are pivotal aspects for enhancing the user experience and elevating the development of organizational performance. Consequently, at the pinnacle of the pyramid, prospective performance outcomes manifest, such as brand and reputation, long-term value for a multitude of stakeholders, and more.

Sustainable leadership is a controversial topic applied in various contexts, and it can be argued that there is no one universal "correct" way to interpret it (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011b). Hargreaves and Fink (2006), Davies (2007), and Lambert (2011) explore this concept by analyzing it at the organizational level, especially in the field of education. On the other hand, Avery and Bergsteiner (2011a) approach sustainable leadership from an organizational perspective in different contexts. Casserley and Critchley (2010) focus on the development of sustainable leaders from an individual perspective. The sustainable leadership framework from the individual and organizational perspective of the mentioned authors are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sustainable leadership framework

	<b>Casserley and Critchley (2010)</b>	<b>Hargreaves and Fink (2006)</b>	<b>Davies (2007)</b>	<b>Lambert (2011)</b>
<b>Definitions</b>	The effectiveness of leadership stems from the successful integration of three key processes: reflection in action, psychological intelligence, and physiological well-being. This integrative approach, along with the organizational culture, is crucial for the development of sustainable leaders and the creation of sustainable organizations. (p. 290)	The future landscape presents different and more challenging demands on leadership. It now becomes leadership for learning, leadership through learning, and leadership as learning. (p.19)	Sustainable leadership can be considered to consist of key factors that support the long-term development of the school. It builds a leadership culture based on moral purpose that ensures success accessible to all. (p. 11)	For sustainable leadership to have any measurable impact on the organization, it requires commitment at all levels to create a culture where leadership skills can be developed. (p. 145)
<b>Sustainable leadership framework</b>	Action reflection and planning Developing psychological intelligence Taking care of physical well-being Aligning key processes with the organizational culture	Depth - sustainable leadership is significant Length - sustainable leadership endures Breadth - sustainable leadership expands Justice - sustainable leadership does no harm and actively enhances the environment Diversity - sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity Resourcefulness - sustainable leadership evolves rather than depletes material and human resources Preservation - Sustainable leadership respects and learns from the past to create an even better future	Focus on outcomes, not just results Alignment of short-term and long-term goals Emphasis on processes, not just plans Passion for goals Combination of personal humility and professional dedication Proper planning and adaptation in line with the strategy Capacity development and creating an inclusive environment Defining strategies for measuring success	Develops employee capabilities Plans strategic distribution Consolidates resources Builds long-term goals based on short-term objectives Promotes diversity Supports preservation

<b>Perspective</b>	The individual perspective focuses on developing sustainable leaders as key actors in achieving sustainability.	The organizational sustainability perspective emphasizes the importance of viewing sustainability as a meal, not a menu. Instead of focusing on short-term and isolated sustainability measures, attention should be directed towards long-term and holistic sustainability thinking as an integral part of the organizational strategy.	Building sustainability as a priority The organizational perspective emphasizes that sustainable leadership should be inherently present in all organizations. This means that sustainability should not be something organizations consider or add as an occasional supplement, but it should be integrated into the very core of their values, goals, strategies, and operations.	The organizational perspective primarily focuses on examining the development of sustainable leadership within organizations.
<b>Research context</b>	In the private sector, sustainable leadership is a concept that has not yet been fully explored through rigorous empirical research. This type of leadership stems from the idea that leaders should encourage and develop individuals rather than deplete them. The goal is to create a sustainable environment in which individuals can thrive and realize their full potential, ultimately contributing to the long-term success of the organization.	In the education sector, sustainable leadership is derived from the concept of principled leadership and is based on research conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States.	In the education sector, considering examples from the United Kingdom and the United States.	In the education sector, considering examples from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Source: adjusted according to Gerard, L., McMillan, J., & D'Annunzio-Green, N. (2017). Conceptualising Sustainable Leadership. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 49, p. 119.

In addition to the mentioned authors, Armani and her colleagues provided a more comprehensive perspective on sustainable leadership in a recent study (Armani et al., 2020). Their aim was to understand which characteristics contribute to changes in organizations striving for sustainability and how these characteristics are interconnected. According to the authors, establishing a link between individual and organizational values can create a crucial foundation for organizations to integrate sustainability into their practices at all corporate levels. They observed that the role of sustainable leadership evolves in accordance with the organization's maturity regarding sustainability.

All the mentioned authors are often cited in the literature on sustainable leadership and are considered key figures in this concept. Exploring these frameworks of sustainable leadership opens up various topics that can be investigated at individual, organizational, and integrated levels.

## 2. Leader characteristics in the context of sustainable leadership

Sustainable leadership from the perspective of leader characteristics relates to the sustainable development values that leaders incorporate and their awareness of sustainable development reflected in their actions (Liao, 2022). Casserley and Critchley (2010) apply the concept of "sustainable" on multiple levels: (1) the individual level, emphasizing the importance of preserving one's mental and physical health; (2) the organizational level, aiming to create a work environment where employees can fulfill their full potential, progress, and contribute to organizational goals aligned with their personal purposes; (3) societal engagement, involving taking responsibility in the broader society; and (4) the ecological level, concerning the preservation and protection of the natural environment.

The first level of sustainable leadership is the personal level, which implies that leaders pay attention to preserving their own mental and physical health. This is considered crucial to ensure the effectiveness of leadership in sustainable organizational development. The development of sustainable leadership is characterized by three fundamental processes: (1) action reflection (learning through practice); (2) psychological intelligence (a clear-defined personal purpose and

awareness of personal assumptions and motivations); and (3) psychological well-being (effective stress management and self-care).

Action reflection refers to the process of thinking and learning from one's own experience to improve future performance, which involves critically examining one's actions, thoughts, and feelings to gain a deeper understanding of oneself and the situation. An essential aspect of action reflection aligns with the arguments put forth by Ferdig (2007), emphasizing the need to encourage conscious thinking in sustainable leaders to achieve a deeper understanding of the challenges and actions of sustainable leadership. Casserley and Megginson (2008) highlight that individual, under appropriate circumstances, can draw valuable lessons and learn from situations of exhaustion. They also support the need for reflection on these situations, which involves thinking about how they came to that point and how they felt during that "experience" or "journey." Accordingly, to emphasize the importance of reflection, the author's state: "Leaders do not emerge or develop by chance; they are formed as a result of the choices an individual makes in their life" (p. 203).

The psychological intelligence of leaders refers to their ability to have a clear sense of personal purpose, awareness of their assumptions and motivations, as well as recognizing their strengths and weaknesses. This includes being open to feedback and learning, understanding the impact of emotions on behavior, and aligning values with goals. Psychological intelligence can contribute to making leaders more effective, flexible, and adaptable in a changing environment. The psychological well-being of leaders relates to their care for mental and physical health. This involves the leader's ability to manage stress, take care of themselves, set boundaries between work and personal life, develop supportive relationships, and find meaning and satisfaction in their work. Psychological well-being can help leaders become more resilient, motivated, and engaged in their leadership.

According to Tideman et al. (2013), changes at both the macro and micro levels require a new form of leadership that goes beyond traditional business leadership. This new leadership demands a shift in thinking, mindset, and leaders' awareness, along with the development of a specific kind of consciousness and relevant skills. Future leaders must be capable of understanding the evolving business contexts, including social, political, cultural, and environmental trends, in order to make strategic decisions. Flexibility, accountability, openness to new ideas, and the ability to learn from mistakes are key traits of leaders in this environment. It's also important for leaders to strike a balance between short-term and long-term goals and to have the moral courage to withstand criticism and control from those adhering to traditional business practices. Sustainable leadership is achieved through the interplay of leaders' awareness of context and time, coupled with the skills of connected and creative leadership.

Metcalf and Benn (2013) emphasize that leaders need to possess exceptional abilities to address the sustainability challenges faced by organizations within complex adaptive systems. This entails understanding and anticipating complexity, skills in dealing with intricate issues, engaging the team in the dynamic changes of the organization, and having emotional intelligence to adaptively manage their own emotions. Leadership plays a crucial role in comprehending the connections between organizational sustainability and the broader systems in which the organization operates. To successfully navigate these connections, extraordinary leaders and leadership systems ready to confront these challenges are necessary.

### **3. Sustainable leadership at the organizational level**

Sustainable leadership at the organizational level represents an integrated leadership activity that encompasses all aspects of the organization and is implemented through relevant practices to create a self-sustaining system within the organization (Liao, 2022). This approach enables organizations to maintain a balance between the economic, social, and environmental dimensions throughout the entire lifecycle, supporting long-term sustainable development. Such an approach makes sustainability an integral part of the organizational culture and strategy, laying the foundation for long-term success and contributions to the community and the environment (Liao, 2022). Sustainability is predominantly successful when the principles advocated by leaders are embraced throughout the entire organization (Galpin & Whittington, 2012). For corporate-level sustainability development, "leaders should move away from a purely economically oriented paradigm and strike a balance between socially and environmentally responsible values" (Stuart, 2013, p. 797). All frameworks of sustainable leadership emphasize the importance of integrating sustainable leadership throughout the entire organization (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Davies, 2007; Casserley & Critchley, 2010; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a; Lambert, 2011) through organizational culture, strategy, and human resource development.

#### **3.1. Organizational culture**

Sustainable leadership serves as a fundamental driver shaping the organizational culture, with a particular focus on innovation and sustainability within the company (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a). Nurturing a robust and shared organizational culture represents one of the advanced practices within sustainable leadership, constituting a long-term objective to pursue diligently. Leaders are tasked with the responsibility of fostering a culture that not only upholds sustainability but also champions shared values and objectives across the entire organization.

As outlined by Casserley and Critchley (2010), the organizational culture and working conditions significantly impact leadership development. Organizational culture encompasses the established norms and prevailing practices, while working conditions encompass job requisites, pressures, control mechanisms, and workplace relationships. To effectively steer leadership towards achieving sustainability, the organizational milieu must be conducive to sustainability. This necessitates the implementation of practices by the organization that not only endorse sustainability but also empower leaders to seamlessly integrate sustainable approaches into their responsibilities. For instance, the organization can institute policies that endorse a balance between work and personal life, promote diversity and inclusion, and actively support sustainable development. The creation of such a supportive work environment facilitates leaders in the smooth adoption of sustainable practices and their active contribution to the organization's sustainability objectives.

### **3.2. Strategic orientation**

Taking a strategic perspective on sustainable leadership involves exploring how leaders can steer their organizations towards sustainability by employing strategic planning and decision-making. This implies that leaders should carefully consider the organization's long-term objectives and its influence on the environment, society, and the economy, aligning these with the organization's business goals. Sustainable leadership also encompasses the promotion of sustainable practices within the organization and the encouragement of responsible behavior towards sustainability among employees. To ensure that sustainability initiatives generate enduring value for both the organization and society, sustainability must be seamlessly integrated into the organization's strategy. Consequently, leaders ensure that sustainability becomes an integral aspect of the business, contributing to the creation of positive impacts on the environment, society, and the economy, all while simultaneously achieving their business objectives.

The values championed by leaders wield significant influence over the successful execution and communication of a strategy, rendering organizational leadership a pivotal determinant in how sustainability is put into action (Stuart, 2013). This calls for top executives to cultivate a more comprehensive perspective of the company, given that sustainability encompasses diverse dimensions of development and performance. These dimensions encompass tending to the physical and mental well-being of employees, establishing a work environment conducive to knowledge development in alignment with the organization's objectives and stakeholder interests, a commitment to socially responsible conduct within a broader context, and the preservation of sustainable systems (Burawat, 2019).

When contemplating the incorporation of sustainable leadership across the entire organization, it is imperative to affect a paradigm shift in the overarching organizational strategy. Johnson (2011) underscores that organizations with a long-term outlook aspire to gradual and uninterrupted transformation, where stability is viewed as incremental enhancement. This continuous transformation is nourished by the organization's vision, offering an inspiring glimpse of a future that all aspire to achieve. When coupled with empowerment, it enables active engagement from all employees.

### **3.3. Development of human resources**

The implementation of human resource development through sustainable leadership entails a comprehensive people-oriented management approach. Sustainable leadership recognizes employees as key stakeholders, emphasizing their significance for the organization's successful operations. It is the responsibility of leaders to nurture a loyal and highly engaged team of employees (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011b).

Sustainable leaders value and develop their employees, and in return, employees support leaders and can exhibit sustainable behavior similar to that of their leaders (Iqbal et al., 2020). Advocates of sustainable leadership highlight the importance of involving all employees in the learning and development process, not just selected groups. Building capacity and resources are pivotal elements of sustainable leadership to make opportunities available to all employees in the organization (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Sustainable leadership must be integrated at all levels and practices of the organization to be effective (Davies, 2007). Distributed leadership can aid in achieving this goal, implying that sustainable leadership should be embedded throughout the entire organization for broad acceptance (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Lambert (2011) also underscores the importance of the entire organization's commitment to sustainable leadership. He views sustainable leadership as an approach that must encompass the entire organization to yield successful outcomes. According to him, sustainable leadership should build a purpose-driven leadership culture that brings success to all employees. It is emphasized that sustainable leadership is not solely focused on the individual interests of leaders but is socially just and directed toward the broader societal good. Therefore, sustainable leadership should transcend the individual and extend to all levels of the organization.

## **4. Integrated approach to sustainable leadership**

The majority of literature on sustainability management highlights the necessity for multifaceted and integrated approaches to attain enduring and sustainable outcomes. Sustainable leadership champions this concept by fusing a vision of sustainability with organizational development, bridging the gap between organizational and individual perspectives. This empowers leaders to remodel organizations into sustainable enterprises and contribute to constructing a sustainable

economic system. The interplay between individuals and the organization assumes a pivotal role in this process, giving due consideration to leaders' interpersonal skills, a focus on stakeholders, and the inclusion of sustainability in business strategies. Coordinating organizational culture, moral values, and principles is equally pivotal in embedding sustainability at both the individual and organizational tiers. The upshot of this holistic approach is the harmonization of leaders' personal practices with organizational measures geared toward achieving sustainable objectives.

Research examining this interaction helps us comprehend how sustainable leadership can encompass and align diverse elements, thereby contributing to the sustainable transformation of organizations. Through this comprehensive approach, leaders assume a central role in attaining sustainability by ensuring a congruence between individual values and organizational objectives, thereby fostering a sustainable and prosperous future. Armani and her colleagues (Armani et al., 2020) have offered a significant contribution in the form of a sustainable leadership framework. Their framework not only identifies key attributes of sustainable leadership but also interconnects them through two perspectives, highlighting their interdependence. The organizational perspective assumes a crucial function in advocating sustainability and reshaping the discourse around it. This outlook concentrates on engaging stakeholders and seeking sustainability within the realm of strategic and specific business viewpoints. Conversely, the personal perspective underscores the significance of leaders' interpersonal skills and their capacity to drive change as individual traits. By amalgamating attributes from both perspectives, sustainability seamlessly becomes an integral part of the organization's dynamics. A harmonized organizational culture, moral values, and principles can culminate in leaders adopting sustainable practices, alongside organizational initiatives that uphold sustainability. This approach underscores the necessity for sustainable leaders to integrate their vision of sustainability into organizational development, effectively merging the organizational and individual viewpoints. In this manner, the organization's transformation into a sustainable business is promoted, thereby contributing to the establishment of a sustainable economic system. Furthermore, research indicates that an organization's maturity in terms of sustainability adoption can influence the varying importance of certain attributes. Depending on the extent of sustainability maturity within the organization, some attributes may assume a greater significance than others. This underscores the need for sustainable leadership attributes to be flexible and adaptable, aligning with the specific organizational context.

According to Casserley and Critchley (2010), achieving a balance between leaders' individual processes and organizational culture is crucial for effective sustainable leadership. Sustainable leadership necessitates leaders taking ownership of their roles within the organization and actively participating in shaping relationships within the organizational context. Leaders who engage with the organization based on their values and objectives become more effective and contribute to the sustainability of leadership. When leaders align their actions with the organization's values and operate in accordance with sustainability goals, it results in improved alignment and collaboration with members of the organization. This fosters an environment conducive to sustainable leadership, ultimately benefiting the entire organization.

## **5. Conclusion**

Sustainable leadership is a crucial element in advancing the sustainable development of organizations. Its focus lies in generating value for society, the environment, and the economy, necessitating internal changes within organizations to establish equilibrium among economic, social, and environmental objectives. The perspective of sustainable leadership can be examined through both leader characteristics and the organizational lens.

When assessing sustainable leadership through leader characteristics, it becomes imperative for leaders to embrace sustainable development values, cultivate sustainability awareness, and demonstrate the capability to make decisions with long-term consequences. This entails the development of introspection, emotional intelligence, and a commitment to their own physical and mental well-being.

Viewed from the organization's standpoint, sustainable leadership requires the seamless integration of sustainable leadership principles into every facet of the organization. This encompasses the organizational culture, strategic orientation, and human resource development. An organizational culture that champions sustainability actively promotes sustainable practices, inclusivity, and diversity within the organization. Strategic orientation demands that leaders harmonize the organization's long-term goals with the preservation of the environment, social responsibility, and economic prosperity. Human resource development concentrates on fostering employee engagement, skill enhancement, and the encouragement of sustainable practices.

It is vital to recognize that sustainable leadership does not adhere to a one-size-fits-all model but is adaptable to various organizational contexts. The realization of sustainable leadership also necessitates collective endeavors and a paradigm shift within organizations to achieve sustainable outcomes. Distributed leadership, involving all employees in making sustainable decisions, can prove instrumental in the triumph of sustainable leadership.

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