



Vaasan yliopisto
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Ville Mäki

Responsible Leadership and Employee Performance in Multicultural Teams

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Author: Ville Mäki
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ABSTRACT:

Vastuullinen johtaminen on nykyään paljon puhuttu aihe. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoite on selvittää, miten vastuullinen johtaminen vaikuttaa työntekijöiden suoriutumiseen monikulttuurisissa tiimeissä. Ensiksi vastuullinen johtaminen määritellään käymällä läpi johtamiskirjallisuutta ja eri teorioita. Tämän jälkeen tarkastellaan monikulttuuristen tiimien kontekstia. Viimeiseksi tutkitaan vastuullisen johtamisen vaikutusta työntekijöiden suoriutumiseen. Tämän tutkimuksen menetelmä on kirjallisuuden laaja tutkiminen. Tämän tutkimuksen tulos on, että isossa enemmistössä tapauksista vastuullinen johtaminen parantaa työntekijöiden suoriutumista. Vastuullisen johtamisen ja suoriutumisen suhteella on paljon välittäjiä. Lisäksi vastuullinen johtaminen on erityisen hyödyllistä monikulttuurisissa tiimeissä. Näistä tuloksista voidaan päätellä, että yritykset hyötyvät vastuullisten johtajien palkkaamisesta ja kouluttamisesta. Tämä tutkimus tarjoaa kattavan katsauksen kirjallisuuteen vastuullisesta johtamisesta ja sen vaikutuksista monikulttuurisissa tiimeissä.

KEYWORDS: Finto: <http://finto.fi/yso/en/?clang=fi&anylang=on>

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the topic of the thesis and why it's important. The background of the topic will be discussed and also the objectives, research questions and structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background of the study

Responsible and ethical leadership is a much talked about topic currently. There has also been a lot of research done on it and on its impact on employee well-being and performance. This thesis will examine some of that research. Multicultural teams are very common in today's global corporate world. International collaboration has become much more common than before. Multicultural teams have some unique advantages but some unique challenges as well. Mainly communication issues and differences in values and expectations. These things can make it difficult for employees in these teams to work together effectively, which hinders their performance. This thesis will discuss how responsible leadership can mitigate these negative effects that multicultural teams can have on performance.

1.2 Objectives of the study and research questions

The objective of this thesis is to examine the influence of responsible leadership on employee performance in multicultural teams. Multiple theories will be used to understand the phenomenon.

The objective of this study will be reached by answering two questions:

- How is responsible leadership defined?
- How responsible leadership influences employee performance in multicultural teams?

1.3 Structure of the study

This thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic as well as the thesis. It discusses the background, objectives, research questions and structure of the study. The second chapter seeks to define responsible leadership as different people understand the concept differently. This is done so the concept can be analyzed clearly in the following chapter. Different theories of leadership will be looked at including stakeholder theory, social exchange theory and virtuous leadership. The third chapter discusses how responsible leadership influences employee performance in multicultural teams. First, the context of multicultural teams is analyzed. It determines the boundaries of this study. Then, the influence of responsible leadership on employee performance is examined. The fourth chapter discusses findings and implications, answers the research questions and summarizes the thesis.

2 Defining responsible leadership

In this chapter, the definition of responsible leadership will be approximated by looking at different theories of responsible leadership. Stakeholder theory, social exchange theory and virtuous leadership will be examined.

2.1 Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory is an economic theory which suggests that businesses must consider all affected parties when making decisions. This is in contrast to a more traditional view that businesses are only responsible to their shareholders. Wagner Mainardes et al. (2011, p. 228) found that while different researchers have slightly different definitions of stakeholder theory, they all share the same core concept: “the company should take into consideration the needs, interests and influences of peoples and groups who either impact on or may be impacted by its policies and operations”

Stakeholder approach to responsible leadership was popularized by Maak & Pless (2006) with their foundational study: “Responsible leadership in a Stakeholder society: A Relational Perspective”. Responsible leadership is a relational process that occurs between leaders and a diverse range of stakeholders who are directly or indirectly affected by the leader’s decisions and actions. These stakeholders can be inside or outside the company (Maak & Pless, 2006, p. 99). This way responsible leadership can be defined as ethical leadership which aims to form trust-based relationships between leaders and different stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006, p. 103). Pless (2007, p. 451) expands on the definition in a later work like this:

Responsible leadership can be understood as the art of building and sustaining social and moral relationships between business leaders and different stakeholders (followers), based on a sense of justice, a sense of recognition, a sense of care and a sense of accountability for a wide range of economic, ecological, social, political and human responsibilities.

Maak & Pless (2006) understand responsible leadership in the context of stakeholder theory. According to stakeholder theory companies are responsible to all of their stakeholders, not just shareholders. Maak and Pless find that, when making decisions, responsible leaders consider all of those who are affected. Leaders should be able to build and maintain trusting relationships with a variety of stakeholders. This is in contrast with an older and more hierarchical idea that there are clear leaders and subordinates. This old model sees leaders as authoritative and charismatic. Our modern business environment is very interconnected. Maak and Pless think that this requires a new kind of approach to leadership where leaders act more as enablers of people being able to work together towards a shared goal. In addition, Maak and Pless associate responsible leadership with the triple-bottom-line: social, ecological and economic responsibility. This means that leaders should consider how their decisions affect different people, the environment and economic outcomes of the company.

Maak & Pless (2006) also suggest a roles model for responsible leaders. They find that there are different kinds of roles that a leader can inhabit. A leader can and should be able to inhabit all of these roles depending on the situation. Maak and Pless present four roles which describe a leader's inner understanding of themselves. For each, they also present a corresponding role that's more practical. A steward is a guardian of values and resources. A citizen cares about the larger community outside of just the company. A visionary provides a shared vision for a desirable future. A servant, like the name suggests, is there to serve others. The respective more practical versions of these roles in order are as follows. An architect builds shared processes, inclusive culture and moral frameworks. A change agent initiates change towards a more ethical business for all stakeholders. A storyteller and meaning enabler creates a shared purpose and narrative. A coach supports individuals to work together for a shared goal.

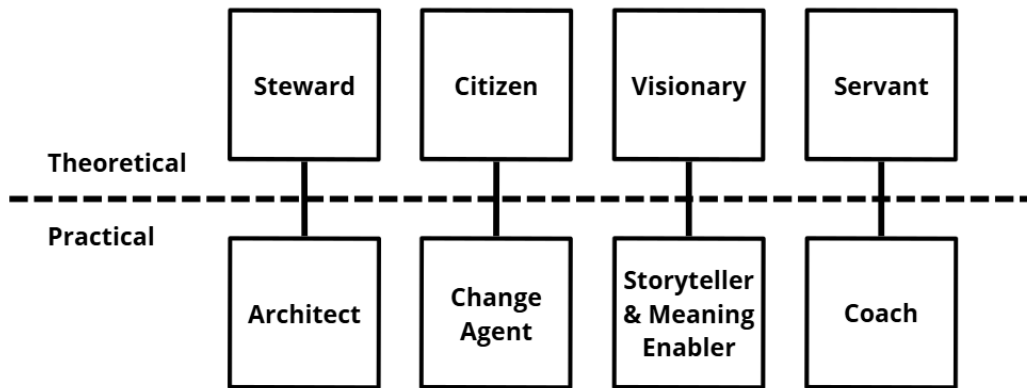


Figure 1: Responsible leadership roles

Maak & Pless (2006, p. 109) also acknowledge that charismatic leadership can be emotionally appealing to employees, but caution that it often centers around the leader's personal traits rather than their ethical responsibilities. From the perspective of stakeholder theory, this focus on individual charisma can be problematic, as it may neglect the broader obligations leaders have toward different stakeholders. Responsible leadership, by contrast, is grounded in trustworthiness, ethical conduct, and a relational approach that prioritizes the interests and well-being of diverse stakeholders. Rather than merely inspiring emotional attachment, responsible leaders build trust through consistent values, ethical decision-making, and accountability to those affected by their actions.

In addition, this kind of responsible and equal leadership suggested by Maak & Pless (2006) is perceived to be inclusive by multicultural teams. Maak & Pless (2006, p. 106) stress the importance of being able to lead in a global and multicultural world. Pless (2007, p. 451) expands on this in a later work, "(Leading) requires relational skills such as being cooperative, being inclusive and being empathetic."

Doh & Quigley (2014) also look at responsible leadership from the perspective of stakeholder theory. They suggest two pathways through which leaders can bring about positive outcomes using a stakeholder approach. These outcomes can manifest at individual,

team, organization or societal levels. The first pathway is psychological, and the second pathway is knowledge-based. The psychological pathway means being inclusive and considering the needs of all stakeholders. The knowledge-based pathway broadly means promoting the flow of knowledge inside and outside the organization. Doh and Quigley find that employees are likely to perceive leaders who use the psychological pathway as more visionary compared to those who don't. Using the psychological pathway also motivates employees and increases their level of engagement with the organization. Also, the two pathways are complementary.

2.2 Social exchange theory

This chapter will look at responsible leadership as an exchange between a leader and their subordinates. Social exchange theory will be utilized. It will be examined how employees weigh the pros and cons of their relationships with their leaders. Social exchange is defined as an initiation by an actor toward the target, an attitudinal or behavioral response from the target in reciprocity, and the resulting relationship (Ahmad et al., 2023). In short, social exchange theory refers to a sociological theory according to which, people evaluate relationships based on what they give and receive.

Social exchange theory provides a perspective on how responsible leadership affects subordinate behavior. According to social exchange theory people value their relationships more when the relationships are more reciprocal. Responsible leaders usually have more reciprocal relationships with their employees. This means that employees usually value their relationships with their leaders more if the leaders exhibit responsible leadership behavior.

Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995) understand leadership in a nontraditional way, though their approach isn't as holistic as the approach of Maak and Pless (2007). They identify three categories of leadership theories: leader-based, follower-based and relationship-based (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 221). They talk about leader-member exchange theory which falls into the relationship-based category. Leader-member exchange basically means the

application of social exchange theory by a leader. Leader-member exchange theory sees leadership as a dyadic relationship between a leader and a follower. Zhao et al. (2019, p. 836) approximate a definition, saying: "The core of LMX (leader-member exchange) is to refute the traditional view that leaders treat all followers under the same leadership style, so as to shift the research focus from the leader to the relationship between supervisor and subordinate"

Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995, p. 229) describe a good leader-member exchange relationship as one based on trust, respect and mutual obligation. This reflects the principles of social exchange theory. Responsible leadership leads to high quality leader-member exchange relationships because responsible leaders consider the needs of their employees and create equal relationships with them. More equal relationships are by definition more reciprocal. This creates good leader-member exchange relationships based on reciprocity and trust. According to social exchange theory, employees value these kinds of relationships highly.

Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995, p. 229) find that high quality leader-member exchange relationships have a positive correlation with several desirable outcomes such as employee performance, satisfaction and commitment. This is because employees value these kinds of relationships highly. They perceive that their leader considers their well-being which increases satisfaction and felt obligation towards the leader.

Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995) don't consider all stakeholders of leadership and are more outcomes based than for example Maak and Pless. Still their findings were progressive at the time. Their study is foundational in the field of leader-member exchange theory. They developed the leadership-making model which advocates building solid relationships with all employees individually instead of forming in-groups and out-groups (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 229). They talk about how leadership happens in interconnected networks of people (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 233), which is very similar to how Pless (2007, p. 450-451) describes it. Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995, p. 238) also find that in addition

to being transactional, leader-follower exchange relationships can be transformational characterized by commitment and shared goals. This suggests that employees see these kinds of relationships as important to them.

2.3 Virtuous leadership

Cameron (2011) equates responsible leadership as virtuousness. He thinks that responsible leadership is not defined by reaching desirable outcomes but rather by being and doing good. Cameron identifies three assumptions that virtuous leadership is based on. They are eudaemonism, inherent value and amplification. Cameron defines eudaemonism as the inherent inclination towards virtuousness in all people. By inherent value, he means that virtuousness is good by itself and not just a tool to reach some end. Lastly, amplification in this case basically means that virtuousness is self-perpetuating as it inspires others to be virtuous as well creating an upward spiral. Cameron also recognizes two good outcomes from virtuous leadership. Virtuousness offers a stable moral guide to navigate change. It also produces positive organizational outcomes. Virtuous leadership has been found to increase employees' commitment, satisfaction, motivation, positive emotions and effort.

Hackett & Wang (2012) attempt to develop a more rigorous definition of virtuous leadership. The study incorporates both western and eastern concepts to understand virtuous leadership. Hackett and Wang identify six cardinal virtues of good leadership by researching Aristotelian and Confucian writings on the topic. There are four Aristotelian virtues which are courage, temperance, justice and prudence. The two remaining Confucian virtues are humanity and truthfulness. (Hackett & Wang, 2012, p. 884)

Later, Wang & Hackett (2016) sought to develop and validate empirical measures of virtuous leadership. Informed by two empirical studies, they created the Virtuous Leadership Questionnaire. The questionnaire is answered by subordinates in order to measure a leader's virtuousness. The questions are based on assessing how well the six cardinal virtues of good leadership describe the leader. The results of the questionnaire predict

variance in several organizational and employee outcomes even when self-assessed virtue and employee-assessed charisma are controlled.

Virtuous leadership has also been shown to have an effect on several organizational outcomes and more specifically on several aspects of employee behavior. Perceived virtuous leadership as defined earlier increases commitment, reduces turnover intention and improves performance (Ribeiro et al., 2025, p. 16-18). Ribeiro et al. (2025, p. 16-18) used a survey to get this data. What they also found is that commitment had a mediating role between virtuous leadership and employee performance (Ribeiro et al., 2025, p. 16-18). In other words, virtuous leadership improves employee performance because it improves employee commitment. Ribeiro et al. (2025) also used social exchange theory to form their hypothesis which turned out to be correct. They speculated as follows: "According to Social Exchange Theory, the followers who perceive their leader as virtuous develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate with positive attitudes, such as increased affective commitment" (Ribeiro et al., 2025, p. 6).

3 The influence of responsible leadership on employee performance in multicultural teams.

In this chapter, the influence of responsible leadership on employee performance will be looked at. First, the context of multicultural teams will be discussed. How the performance of multicultural teams is affected by responsible leadership, will be analyzed second.

3.1 The context of multicultural teams

Witt & Stahl (2016) compared how western and eastern leaders understand responsible leadership. They analyzed three eastern and two western societies. The eastern societies were Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea and the western were Germany and the United States. Witt and Stahl found that the attitudes of the leaders towards different stakeholders vary a lot. How they understood the purpose of the company also differs.

Leaders from the United States and Hong Kong prioritized increasing shareholder value. Japanese and German leaders considered all stakeholders but focused on employees. Korean leaders were in the middle. They thought that shareholders are important but not the only point of focus. Witt & Stahl (2016) also find that institutional factors account for more variation in these things than cultural factors. This is because the difference between countries in stakeholder orientation did not correlate with how different the culture is in those countries (Witt & Stahl, 2016, p. 630-636).

Witt & Stahl's (2016) study tells us that leaders from different countries understand responsible leadership very differently. It varies, which stakeholder groups leaders feel responsible to. Even though the variation might be explained by institutional factors rather

than cultural ones, it still means that people with different nationalities have different understandings.

Greige & Khayr (2017) conducted a systematic literature review of responsible leadership. Among other things, they looked at challenges of responsible leadership. They found that managing stakeholders with differing cultural backgrounds is a challenge for leaders because it creates communication problems (Greige & Khayr, 2017, p. 287). This is why responsible leadership is very important in multicultural teams.

Leung & Wang (2015) argue that multicultural teams have advantages as well as challenges. They studied creativity in multicultural teams and what factors affect it. They argue that multiculturalism on its own is neither a good nor a bad thing. It has some advantages such as diversity of perspectives and ideas. It also has some challenges such as miscommunication and value clashes.

3.2 The influence of responsible leadership on employee performance

Lynham & Chermak (2006) suggest a theoretical model called responsible leadership for performance. According to this model of leadership, leaders must consider all stakeholders. They also have to demonstrate effectiveness, ethics and endurance. Lastly, they have to benefit the system mission, work processes, social sub-systems and the individual performer. (Lynham & Chermak, 2006, p. 75-78) This study presents a theoretical model of responsible leadership that improves performance, though it hasn't been empirically tested.

Martin & others (2016) conducted a meta-analytic review on the relationship between performance and specifically leader-member exchange. They found that high quality leader-member exchange relationships strongly predict good employee performance. It increased task performance and also reduced counterproductive behavior. On top of that, it increased citizenship performance which means activities outside of main tasks

that still help the organization. (Martin et al., 2016, p. 94-96) This study shows that responsible leadership can improve performance through creating high quality leader-member exchange relationships.

Martin and others (2016) also found that trust, motivation, empowerment and job satisfaction had a mediating role between leader-member exchange and task performance and between leader-member exchange and citizenship performance with trust having the largest effect. Citizenship performance had organizational commitment as an additional mediator. (Martin et al., 2016, p. 97) In addition, one important thing that they analyzed was causal direction. They found that high quality leader-member exchange increases performance and not the other way around (Martin et al., 2016, p. 99). This study supports the idea that high quality leader-member exchange has a positive effect on employee performance. Additionally, the study tells us that trust, motivation, empowerment and job satisfaction have a positive effect on employee performance. These concepts have been mentioned previously in this thesis as outcomes of responsible leadership.

Liu and others (2024) challenge this in their 2024 study. They studied the influence of ethical leadership on team performance. Ethical leadership is semi-comparable to responsible leadership in this study. Liu et al. (2024, p. 2133) define it as behaving ethically and encouraging that same behavior in others. This way it's related to the concept of virtuous leadership. Though it should be mentioned that the terms are not exactly the same. Liu et al. (2024, p. 2133) emphasize that an ethical leader creates ethical norms for their team and enforces those norms. This is not necessarily a part of virtuous leadership.

Liu and others (2024) found that these norms create conflict avoidance in teams. Ethical leadership decreased both relationship conflict and task conflict. Decreased relationship conflict led to increased team performance, but decreased task conflict led to decreased team performance. This way ethical leadership is a double-edged sword. Also, team

power disparity played a moderating role. Ethical leadership had a stronger effect on both relationship conflict and task conflict in teams with a lower power disparity. (Liu et al., 2024, p. 2143)

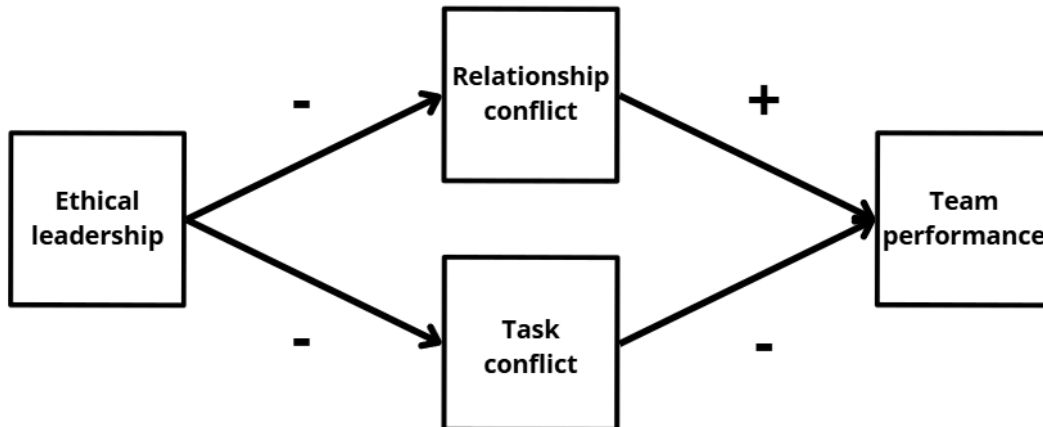


Figure 2: The influence of ethical leadership on team conflict and performance

Greige Frangieh & Khayr Yaacoub (2017) also looked at outcomes in their systematic literature review of responsible leadership. They found that responsible leadership affects several different dimensions of a company. Firstly, it improves the company's financial performance. Secondly, responsible leadership increases, for example employees' job satisfaction, commitment, motivation and productivity which leads to increased performance. Thirdly, it improves the company's reputation. (Greige Frangieh & Khayr Yaacoub, 2017, p. 289-292)

Haque and others (2021) also conducted a systematic literature review of responsible leadership. They studied its relationship with different employee outcomes. What they found is that responsible leadership decreases presenteeism, which means coming to work ill. Commitment and turnover intention mediate this relationship. Responsible leadership increases commitment which leads to decreased presenteeism. Responsible leadership decreases turnover intention which also leads to decreased presenteeism. (Haque et al., 2021, p. 398-399) Presenteeism is a bad thing because it leads to lower

employee performance (Haque et al., 2021, p. 384). It lowers productivity and that way increases a company's losses (Haque et al., 2021, p. 384). Therefore, the study of Haque et al. (2021) shows us that responsible leadership increases employee performance through decreasing presenteeism. The study also connects responsible leadership to other positive outcomes like for example increased commitment and decreased turnover intention.

Marques and others (2023) studied the connection between responsible leadership and expatriation success. They found that responsible leadership has a positive correlation with expatriate well-being and adjustment to the host country (Marques et al., 2023, p. 271-274). They didn't find a direct correlation between responsible leadership and expatriate performance. Still, they think it might have an indirect positive impact through increased adjustment: "Our interpretation of this is that RL may enhance performance over time" (Marques et al., 2023, p. 273). This study shows that responsible leadership is especially beneficial in the case of expatriates as it helps with the problem of adjusting to the host country.

He et al. (2021) studied how corporate social responsibility (CSR), green human resource management (GHRM) and responsible leadership influence employees' green behavior and task performance. They found that CSR, GHRM and responsible leadership increase employee performance through increasing green behavior (H et al., 2021, p. 1049). This study supports the connection between responsible leadership and increased employee performance but only when combining responsible leadership with CSR and GHRM and only when mediated by green behavior.

Increased green behavior increases task performance through increased knowledge, increased skill and better aligning the employees with organizational values (He et al., 2021, p. 1046). He et al. (2021, p. 1046) state: "Green behavior means that employees care about the sustainability of the organization and absorb pro environmental knowledge

and values at work which facilitates their efficiency and effectiveness in task accomplishments”

Wang et al. (2024) studied the connection between CEO responsible leadership and employee performance. They found that CEO responsible leadership increases employee performance, but it's mediated by the type of climate the CEO creates in the organization (Wang et al., 2024, p. 1955). This study tells us that even the leadership style of the CEO affects employee performance even though the effect is not direct but rather through creating a certain kind of climate in the company.

Lin et al. (2024) analyzed the influence of responsible leadership on employee performance in construction projects. In their study they used a stakeholder perspective to define responsible leadership. They also discussed the concepts of felt obligation and organizational identification. Felt obligation means that employees feel obligated to support the project (Lin et al., 2024, p. 266). Organizational identification means that employees feel proud to be a part of the project (Lin et al., 2024, p. 267).

Lin et al. (2024) found that responsible leadership improves employee performance. This relationship is mediated by felt obligation and organizational identification. Also, a caring ethical climate moderates the relationship between organizational identification and performance. They also found that demographic information about the employees affects the results of the study. (Lin et al., 2024, p. 273)

Lin et al. (2020) studied some of the same things. They also studied the effects that responsible leadership and knowledge sharing have on employee performance. Their study produced similar results. Both responsible leadership and knowledge sharing enabled employee performance (Lin et al., 2020, p. 1885-1889). Drawing from social exchange theory, Lin et al. (2020, p. 1881) hypothesized that work engagement and helping initiatives mediate these relationships. They found the hypothesis to be correct (Lin et al., 2020, p. 1885-1889). In addition, the effect of responsible leadership on work

engagement and helping initiatives was found to be stronger for employees with a longer job tenure (Lin et al., 2020, p. 1885-1889).

Effects of responsible leadership	Source
Increased: performance, trust, motivation, empowerment, job satisfaction	Martin et al. 2016
Mixed effects on performance	Liu et al. 2024
Increased: job satisfaction, commitment, motivation, productivity	Greige Frangieh & Khayr Yaacoub 2017
Increased: commitment Decreased: turnover intention, presenteeism	Haque et al. 2021
Increased: green behavior, performance	He et al. 2021
Increased: performance	Wang et al. 2024
Increased: performance, felt obligation, organizational identification	Lin et al. 2024
Increased: performance, work engagement	Lin et al. 2020

Figure 3: The effects of responsible leadership by study

4 Conclusions

Responsible leadership is generally beneficial but extra important in multicultural teams. This is because employees from different cultural backgrounds can have very different values, assumptions and understandings. This can create communication difficulties which responsible leadership can address. Of course, teams also benefit from multiculturalism.

Responsible leadership has a lot of effects on employees in multicultural teams. It can produce several desirable outcomes such as increased employee performance, trust, motivation, empowerment, job satisfaction, commitment and productivity. Employee performance is increased through increasing commitment, trust, motivation, empowerment and job satisfaction. Though, responsible leadership has a direct effect on employee performance as well. It's possible for responsible leadership to have a negative effect on employee performance through decreased task conflict. With that being said, responsible leadership generally improves employee performance. This happens in almost all cases.

The relationship between responsible leadership and employee performance can be mediated by a lot of different factors. On top of the ones already mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are also green behavior, organizational climate, felt obligation, organizational identification, knowledge sharing, work engagement and helping initiatives. This shows that responsible leadership often impacts responsible leadership indirectly, though not always.

These findings have many implications. Firstly, companies benefit from searching for responsible leaders when hiring. Selecting for responsible leadership qualities when hiring is important especially because some of those traits are developed over a long period of time and are therefore difficult to teach someone quickly (Pless, 2007, p. 451). Secondly, companies benefit from training their employees in leadership roles to act more

responsibly. Both of these actions improve employee performance as well as the company's sustainable behavior. The actions are also extra important in multicultural teams as responsible leadership benefits them even more.

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