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# **Sustainable Strategic Leadership and Organizational Goal**

School of Management  
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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines Sustainable Strategic Leadership (SSL) as one of the key elements of attaining long-term organizational objectives and competitive advantage. Combining the environmental, social and economic facets with the theory of leadership, the research relies on the practice theory, organizational cognition and institutional work approaches to describe the process of making the notion of sustainability a part of the routine of the organization.

The qualitative multi-case study method was utilized in data collection where interviews and document analysis were combined in data analysis using the thematic and configurational approaches. The results indicate that the behaviour of leaders including stakeholder engagement, performance system redesign and symbolic behaviour establishes cognitive, institutional and cultural processes between sustainability and performance. The research has not only its theoretical but also practical implications as well since it provides an example of how leadership can turn sustainability not only into rhetoric but also routinized strategic reality.

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**Keywords:** Sustainable leadership, practice theory, organizational cognition, institutional work, configurational analysis, sustainability performance.

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## Abbreviations

**ABV:** Attention-Based View

**CEO:** Chief Executive Officer

**ESG:** Environmental, Social, and Governance

**HEIs:** Higher Education Institutions

**HR:** Human Resources

**KPIs:** Key Performance Indicators

**R&D:** Research and Development

**SSL:** Sustainable Strategic Leadership

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the Study

In the current global economy, companies increasingly expect to obtain more than mere financial benefits. They must operate responsibly and contribute to sustainable development goals, requiring strategic leadership that balances economic, social, and environmental priorities. This rising demand has positioned sustainable strategic leadership as a vital organizational competency. Sustainability as a concept has transformed to be a peripheral issue to a central strategic need (Eccles et al., 2014). Leadership should change, also in this paradigm shift. Sustainable Strategic Leadership (SSL) becomes a vital construct, which incorporates the long-term outlooks of economic, social and environmental sustainability in the heart of strategy choice and organizational purpose (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011). Sustainable Strategic Leadership (SSL) emphasizes long-term thinking, ethical decision-making, and the integration of sustainability into core strategy. Studies have shown that such leadership enhances organizational adaptability, promotes stakeholder trust, and fosters innovation (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Waldman and Siegel, 2008). For example, transformational leadership, which focuses on vision, empowerment, and engagement, has been found to improve both employee satisfaction to customer loyalty (Chiang et al., 2019). Furthermore, successful change leaders demonstrate behaviors like openness, collaboration, and purpose-driven communication (Gill, 2003; Higgs and Rowland, 2011). The above abilities are essential to guide organizations through uncertainty while maintaining a commitment to achieve environmentally friendly effects. As industry and personal obstacles become increasingly interconnected, insight into how leadership can provide a long-term aspiration agreement becomes more and more pressing.

However, despite growing academic interest in both leadership and sustainability, research connecting the two remains limited in scope. Many studies treat sustainability and leadership as distinct areas, rarely exploring how sustainability principles are trans-

lated into leadership behaviors that drive strategy and performance. While change-oriented leadership has proven effective in dynamic environments, its application to sustainability-driven goals is still under-researched (Gill, 2003; Higgs & Rowland, 2011). Similarly, most empirical studies have focused on Western corporate contexts, often overlooking how cultural and contextual factors shape the practice of sustainable leadership in diverse regions (Pless and Maak, 2011). Boiral et al. (2020) highlight the importance of internal leadership qualities, such as mindfulness and authenticity, shaping sustainability outcomes. Furthermore, Epstein and Buhovac (2014) identify common thoughts between long-term sustainability goals and short-term financial targets, making strategic alignment a leadership challenge. This proposal responds to those research calls by investigating how sustainable strategic leadership contributes to achieving measurable organizational goals in real-world scenarios.

This thesis states that to comprehend this how, one has to go away beyond correlational research to explore the organizational and social processes. We employ the practice theory (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006) to describe the process of sustainability routine, the focus on attention-based perspective (Ocasio, 1997) to examine how leaders shift organizational focus, and the institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) to describe leaders as the creators of new, sustainability-oriented norms. This method is a reaction to the research requests of more sophisticated empirical studies on the micro-understandings of the empirical nature of the topic of the phenomenon of SSL and its influence on the attainment of quantifiable organizational objectives in the practical situation, especially in a variety of conditions (Pless and Maak, 2011; Boiral et al., 2020).

## **1.2 Objectives of the Thesis and Research Questions**

Sustainable leadership is a central component in the alignment of organization goals and the general objectives of the environment and society at large. Sustainable leadership fosters the establishment of long-term organizational success by balancing economic feasibility, environmental management, and social justice in decision making to overcome the urgent international concerns. This is a way that not only builds corporate image but it is also a way of improving the performance in general as displayed in several

researches. Sustainable leadership is based on the long-term approach, and this guarantees that organizations are flexible and resilient to environmental uncertainties (Sattar, 2024). It is recommended that leaders need to involve various stakeholders, facilitate transparency and accountability, and organizational culture as well as social sustainability are reinforced (Lewandowska et al., 2023). Sustainable leadership has a direct impact on environmental practices, and it has a positive impact on the green performance and the intention to be ecologically responsible (Hussain, 2023). Data obtained by Saudi businesses suggests that a positive impact of sustainability practices and green leadership is substantial in terms of organizational performance and corporate image (Karawya, 2024). Although the positive aspects of sustainable leadership are evident, there is an assertion that the immediate profitability may be prioritized over long term sustainability needs, which can make the implementation of these practices quite challenging in some companies.

The main aim of this thesis is to provide an empirical study with the interaction between sustainable strategic leadership practices and the attainment of organizational goals.

The research question that will be the centre of the given research is:

1. "How does sustainable strategic leadership impact the achievement of organizational goals?"

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

This research has a number of important contributions. Firstly, it adds to the conceptual literature on sustainable leadership in terms of the expression of its relationship between individual sustainability, the conceptualization of sustainable leadership, and the results of strategic goal-setting and performance (Ferdig, 2007). Second, it presents a more solid theoretical basis as it incorporates the practice theory, organizational cognition and institutional work, thus presenting a multi-level explanation of the phenomenon of the SSL. Finally, it gives the practitioners a more practical insight into the routines, mental frames, and change processes that will be necessary to instil sustainability at the heart of leadership and strategy.

## **1.4 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is subdivided into five chapters. This Introduction will be followed by the Literature Review, which will critically examine the existing theories of sustainable and strategic leadership and present the main theoretical frames of the practice theory, the attention-based view, and the institutional work. Methodology chapter will introduce the qualitative case study design with added information on such aspects as case selection and rigor of analysis. The Findings chapter will include the empirical evidence that will be complemented by direct texts and emphasis on the determination of causal mechanisms. The findings will be interpreted in the Discussion chapter using the integrated theoretical framework. The Conclusion will also summarize the study, the theoretical and practical contributions of the study and give recommendations on future research.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

This chapter represents the primary theoretical basis of the research and is not only supposed to introduce the most important notions and frameworks associated with Sustainable Strategic Leadership. It starts with the definition of the concept of Strategic Leadership and its development towards the approaches that could be considered as a sustaining factor. The chapter discusses various models and theories of sustainable strategic leadership, which combine the three aspects of environmental, social, and economic dimensions of organizational strategy. Additionally, it also links corporate sustainability and the concept of sustainable value creation with how businesses can gain long term competitive advantage by integrating sustainability in its strategic directions. A number of sustainability frameworks are analyzed to reflect how organizations could effectively incorporate sustainability into their core business operations and core decision making to create added value to the environment, stakeholders and the company itself. It is also noted in the discussion that sustainable strategies and leadership practices lead to improved performance and resilience, which helps organizations to continue to be profitable as well as encouraging responsible and ethical business practices.

However, in the end, this chapter tries to find the place where the strategic commitment of a company to sustainability, especially in the manufacturing industry, is converted into tangible profitability and sustainable competitive advantage.

### **2.1 Concept of Sustainable Leadership**

Brundtland committee was the first to introduce the concept of sustainable development into the sphere of organization management. They have indicated that sustainable development is a form of development that satisfies the needs of the present without infringing the needs of the future generations. The concept has raised a heated debate in the academic fraternity later and is currently being widely studied. As an example, Pearce and Turner (1990) proposed the model of the circular economy where the economy and the environment are mutually dependent on each other. Weale (1992) was of the view that sustainable development questions the mutually exclusive interaction

amid economy and environment that restates the conflict between the two conceptualized once again. Based on this, Elkington and Rowlands (1999) suggested a triple bottom line model of sustainable development, which implies that social, environmental (ecological) and financial (economic) indicators are the balance approaches to assess the performance of the enterprise business. This is, in addition to the profit and loss account, the enterprises should also regard their own effects on the environment and social responsibility which implies that the enterprises should minimize the negative effects of the economic growth to increase the sustainability of the development. Meanwhile, the current literature has demonstrated that the pursuit of sustainable development of enterprises capable of conducting sustainable entrepreneurial processes has also opened new opportunities to them (Kumar and Kiran, 2017).

But as the social and environmental issues and problems that are created by economic development are increasing, there is a serious concern. Lack of balance between economic benefits, social responsibility, and environmental protection in the process of enterprise operation. What can be done to eliminate this imbalance and obtain the objectives of enhancing performance, resilience and sustainability has become an issue of prevalent interest in the circles of practical and theoretical interest. To consider more stakeholders, leaders should introduce the idea of sustainable development, instill it in the organization, and apply sustainable leadership behavior because the leader is the catalyst of the enterprise change (Avery, 2005). The concept of sustainable development, coupled with the concept of leadership, was merged with Hargreaves and Fink (2004) and Avery (2005) and the notion of sustainable leadership was presented. Since then, its connotation has been discussed by numerous scholars depending on different context.

## **2.2 Concept of Strategic Leadership**

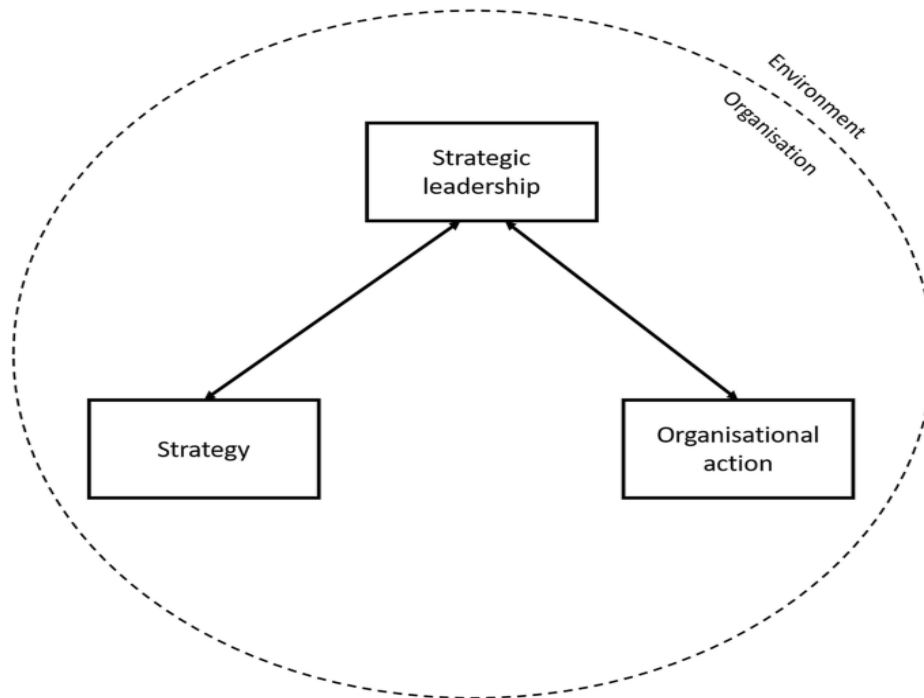
Strategic leadership is the capacity of a leader to guide an organization toward accomplishing its strategic objectives through the most efficient use of resources (Suharto, 2023).

Strategic leadership is a leadership style which is concerned with long term planning and a vision of where the future is. It entails leaders applying innovative problem solving and

strategizing approaches to enable their organizations and teams to achieve their objectives Warwick Business School. (n.d.). Strategic leadership is not only a style, but a way of thinking. It entails the knowledge on the prevailing condition, evaluation of facts, planning in advance to attain both present and future objectives. This style also enables leaders to succeed in turbulent environments particularly in times of competition or change at a high rate in the market Warwick Business School. (n.d.).

Strategic leadership transcends the conventional leadership paradigms as it pays attention to the long-term vision and the general direction in which an organization is headed. It is a combination of leadership and management practices that can help an organization to move in the right direction towards its objectives whilst being flexible to changes in the external environment. The future of the organization is influenced by the decisions made by the strategic leaders and therefore a thorough knowledge of the internal and external environment is required (Bentley University, 2025).

However, strategic leadership is not what tactical or operational leadership deals with, that is, being able to create the path towards the long term and day-to-day operations. It is a wider viewpoint that takes into consideration matters like market dynamics, competitive environment, technological changes and socio-economic changes (Bentley University, 2025).



**Figure 1.** The implementation of strategic leadership establishes the conditions necessary for alignment among important organizational elements (Tipurić, 2022)

### 2.3 Organizational Goals and Strategic Alignment

The process of making sure that an organization's many goals, actions, and resources are coordinated to meet its long-term objectives and overarching strategic vision is known as organizational goals and strategic alignment. By reducing conflicting efforts and guaranteeing that everyone is working toward the same goal, this alignment forges a single path that improves efficiency, teamwork, and performance.

### 2.4 Sustainable Strategic Leadership Models

The sustainable strategic leadership models combine the long-term vision with such principles as systems thinking, stakeholder engagement, and adaptability to balance environmental, social, and economic objectives. The most influential ones are the so-called Four Ps (perception, process, people, projection) and the models that focus on such characteristics as a sustainability mindset, robust ethical governance, and a focus on long-term resilience, but not short-term profits. These leaders focus on relationship building,

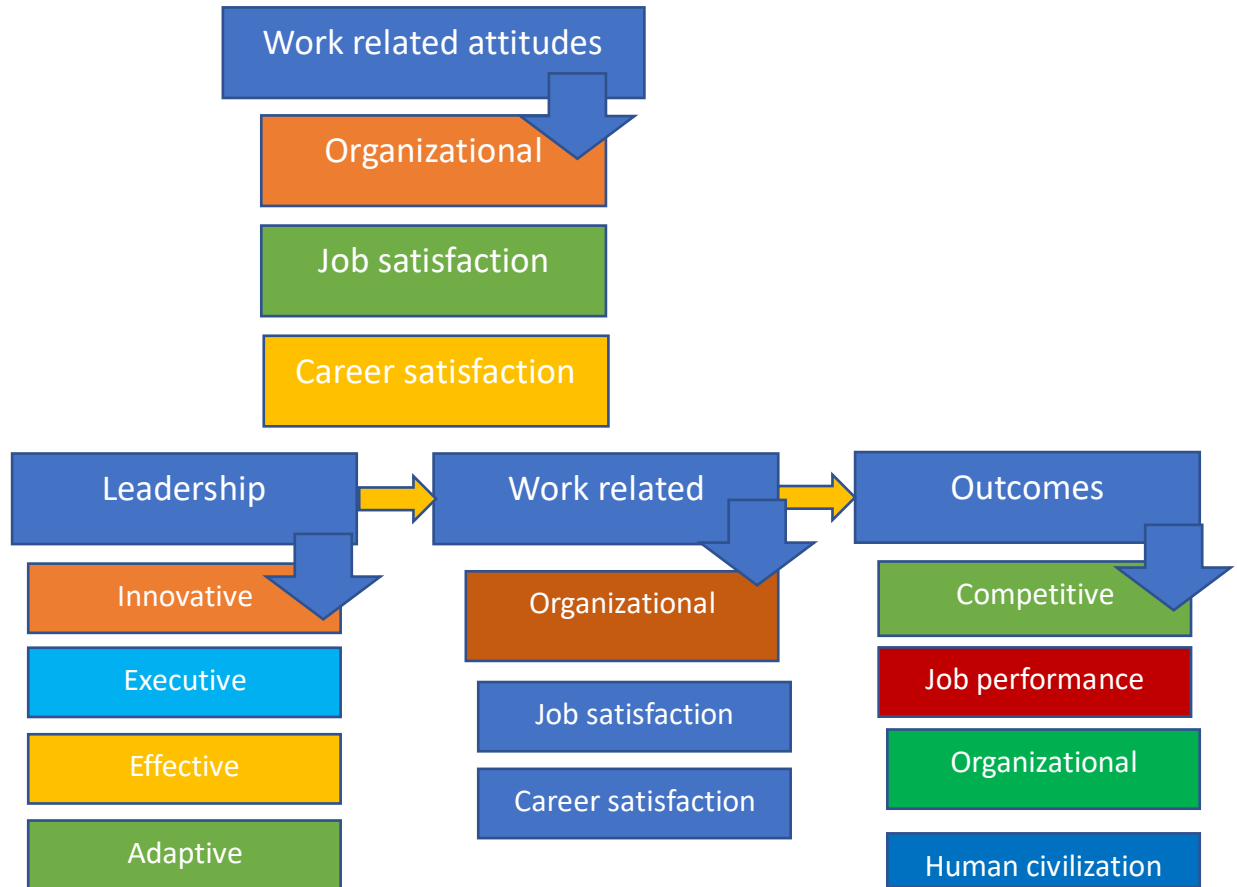
innovation, and development of a force of good that is beneficial to all the stakeholders (Steeger, 2023).

A sustainable leadership model featured in a research paper by Karia and Asaari (2019) offers a sustainable leadership model to search a mechanism of contributing to the educational quality and the competitiveness of the HEIs personnel through the self-leaders themselves. The research is targeted at leadership qualities and work-related attitudes as one of the enhancers of the competitiveness of the HEIs. The most noticeable predictor of competitive success and productivity of organizations is the intrinsic leadership values that are inherent in knowledge resources (Abbas et al., 2016; Al-Malki and Juan, 2018; Karia and Asaari, 2019; Shaikh, et al., 2021; Mushtaq, et al., 2021; Tunio, and Shaikh (2021; Shaikh, and Tunio, 2020). They are the agents to capitalize and implement technology, intangibles, and physical resources which can make HEIs competitive advantage. Actions, achievement, and success are inspired by the attributes of leadership, which in turn enable better job and organizational performance, and competitive advantage. Adequate knowledge resources therefore can be used to attain organizational performance and competitive advantages. The knowledgeable leaders; the ones skilled in the professional, management and business skills will operate effectively, and as a result, the performance of these leaders will be of high quality in terms of service, innovation, and cost (Karia and Wong, 2013; Gilal, et al., 2021; Tunio, et al., 2021; Katpar., et al., 2020). According to Karia (2018a), the complex bundle of talents (e.g., skills, knowledge, experience, and expertise) can be observed in the form of managers/ leaders or stored in a firm with the greatest potential to contribute to the competitiveness of firms (enhancing work-related attitudes of the employees to increase services and lower costs). The knowledge resources evolve and develop with the intention of generating a huge competitive edge.

be ahead of competitors due to leadership qualities. Karia (2018a, 2018b) states that knowledge resources are a powerful mediator in the connection between technology

resources and performances; as a necessary predictor and a valuable mediator, the eventual source of competitiveness in the techno-logical and digital age.

The research model proposed in Figure 1 provides the new sustainable leadership model that promote individual and firm level employee attitudes and performance outcomes. The model is an innovative and potent instrument to empower the work-related attitude of employees. This new leadership model is aimed at explaining the intrinsic values of leadership; the smartness and novelty of knowledge resources contribute more to the positive attitudes of individuals: organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and career satisfaction (Karia and Assari, 2019) that result in job and organizational performance, competitiveness, and civilization. This model enables organizations to leverage on their employee leadership qualities to increase a positive and healthy working condition by shielding them against a stressful environment in an era of a fast-developing technology. It is significant potential of enhancing human civilization and national prosperity through the constant enhancement of employee physical-mental-spiritual health.



**Figure 2.** Leadership model

### **Some Main Aspects of Sustainable Strategic Leadership Models**

- **Sustainability Mindset:** Strong devotion to long-term objectives and the bottom line of sustainability that includes profit, social, and environmental objectives.
- **Systems Thinking:** This is the skill to see the whole picture and how various components affect others, the interconnectedness of the organization with its surrounding world.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Relationship Building:** Every solution that is developed needs to involve a multitude of stakeholders (e.g., businesses, governments, communities, NGOs) in order to formulate equitable and widely-backed solutions (Ramakrishnan, 2025).
- **Adaptability and Agility:** The ability to move through complex and uncertain environments, keep an open mind and make strategies dynamic and flexible to emerging challenges.
- **Vision and Communication:** The development and effective communication of a clear long-term vision to provide inspiration and motivation to others. This involves the use of emotion and being a role model.
- **Ethical Governance:** This is anchored on following professional and ethical standards which are a requirement to establishing a sustainable organization.
- **Drive to Growth and Innovation:** The emphasis is placed on the constant improvement, the promotion of experiments and individual and group development to stimulate an innovation and sustain energy in the long run (Ramakrishnan, 2025).
- **Change Orientation:** It is the readiness to transform the organization structures, processes, and culture to meet long-term sustainability objectives (Ramakrishnan, 2025).

### Example Frameworks

- ✓ **The Four Ps Model:** This model uncovers four crucial areas that are important in strategic leadership which includes perception, process, people and projection.
- ✓ **Sustainable Leadership Model (Europe):** This is a comprehensive model that uses the principles of good governance and states five key dimensions that leaders should follow in their journey towards sustainability transition (Strategic Leadership: Enhancing Your Personal Effectiveness, 2025).

### Role of Leadership in Achieving Organizational Sustainability

Organizational sustainability heavily relies on leadership because it entails establishing a clear vision, also creating a culture that encourages the achievement of long-term economic, environmental, and social objectives and catalyzing the required strategic and operational transformations. Good leaders inspire the employees, organize the teams towards the goals of sustainability, and exemplify the behavior of sustainability, which is necessary in the successful introduction of sustainability to the core strategies and everyday activities of the company (Alnamlah and Nalband, 2024).

The quest to achieve organizational sustainability is a radical paradigm shift of a conventional, profit-focused model in one that is more holistic in balancing the economic, environmental, and social priorities, often referred to as the triple bottom line. Such a complicated process, though, cannot occur without the active and strategic role of leadership that serves as the main driving and planning force of significant change. The leaders do not just appreciate the sustainability initiatives, they are the key visionaries that incorporate the sustainability initiatives in the main strategic canvas of the organization. The studies repeatedly indicate that the positive assimilation of sustainability into the business practice is strongly reliant on the top-level strategic direction, since without such a commitment, all the undertakings tend to be rather consolidated and do not create a systemic effect (Engert et al., 2016, p. 2843). By expressing an inspiring vision, and laying down more ambitious long-term ambitions, leaders give the organization the real north

that brings together every part on a long-term trajectory of sustainability and competitive edge, far beyond just adherence to a false sense of compliance to a strategy that serves as a force of purpose.

Moreover, the leadership role is not limited to strategy, but moves to the important sphere of organizational culture, where it is simply impossible to execute the policies and goals without a positive attitude spreading throughout the company. Leaders remain the prime strategists of a culture that is sustainability-based by demonstrating the behaviours they want, enabling employees, and harmonising reward systems with the environmental and social goals. The transformational leadership has a significant impact on this cultural shaping and contributes to creating a common sense of commitment to the sustainability principles in an employee (Ferguson and Milne, 2020, p. 8). By leaders being true champions of values like ethical sourcing, energy efficiency, and employee welfare they will send a strong signal that there is a genuine commitment that will make the organization buy-in and innovate proactively at all levels. This will drive a culture in which sustainable practices are embedded in the organizational identity, and are not viewed as an external or discretionary requirement, which helps to develop the internal capacity to make change sustainable.

Lastly, leaders should be decisive change agents and stakeholder engagers so as to overcome the external complexities present in the sustainability environment. That transition to sustainability models may need disruptive innovation, and the complex management of multiple stakeholder expectations, including investors and regulators, local communities and supply chain partners. Sustainability leadership presupposes the promotion of the innovation and active regulation of environmental and social risks, and, as a result, the ability to develop innovative approaches is the responsibility of the managerial work (Haque and Ntim, 2018, p. 418). This externally oriented position is also summarized in the notion of Responsible Leadership, which lays stress on the development and sustenance of trusting relationships with all stakeholders, which is directly related to better social and environmental performance (Miska et al., 2016, p. 206). Leaders are

able to earn the social license to act and mobilize the masses through open communication of the organizational process and working with outside organisations thus making their organization leading in a sustainable and fair economy.

## **2.5 Sustainable leadership practices**

A few writers have indicated benefits on the sustainable leadership style as compared to its short-term shareholder-first counterpart (Avery, 2005). These principles have been defined and explored by Avery and Bergsteiner (2012) demonstrating the difference in application. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) first defined 19 leadership practices with a sample of 14 European organizations whose principals were diametrically opposite to the shareholder-first philosophy, and then came to name the two approaches Rhineland and Anglo/US. She discovered that the two approaches consist of two diametrically opposite groups of practices, which constitute self-reinforcing systems. Avery then applied the 19 criteria to a sample of 14 organizations elsewhere in the world, who had implemented sustainable practices of Rhineland to differing extents. She proved that the enterprises that are first to lead may thrive in various sectors and areas both in the developed world of USA, UK, Australia, Europe and Scandinavia and in emerging economies of South Africa and Thailand. By including four elements, Avery and Bergsteiner (2012) increased the list of practices to 23 as presented in (Table 1). Table 1 compares the extremes between the sustainable approach to leadership which is the honeybee approach and the shareholder-first or locust approach on each of the practices. These are also known as practices, but others are more clearly indicative of general principles or attitudes.

<b>Element</b>	<b>Sustainable Leadership ("Honey- bee")</b>	<b>Shareholder-First ("Locust")</b>
<b>Core Philosophy</b>	Stakeholder-focused, collaborative, and socially responsible.	Shareholder-focused, aggressive, and profit-driven.
<b>View of Employees</b>	Values and develops all staff; seeks long-term retention.	Views staff as a cost; accepts high turnover.
<b>Ethical Stance</b>	"Doing the right thing" is a core, non-negotiable value.	Ethics are flexible and viewed as a manageable risk.
<b>Time Perspective</b>	Prioritizes long-term goals and sustainability.	Focuses on short-term profits and immediate growth.
<b>Decision Making</b>	Decisions are consensual and delegated throughout the organization.	Decision-making is centralized with top management.
<b>Team Orientation</b>	Relies on extensive, empowered, and self-managing teams.	Uses limited, manager-led teams with close supervision.
<b>Trust &amp; Culture</b>	High-trust environment with a strong, shared culture.	Low-trust, controlled by monitoring and procedures.
<b>Innovation</b>	Fosters widespread, systemic innovation at all levels.	Innovation is limited and often bought from outside.
<b>Staff Engagement</b>	Cultivates emotional commitment and intrinsic motivation.	Relies on financial rewards as the primary motivator.
<b>Social/Environmental Role</b>	Protects the environment and values community responsibility.	Willing to exploit the environment and community for gain.

**Table 1:** Standards that differentiate shareholder-first viewpoints from normal sustainable leadership Source: Avery and Bergsteiner (2010)

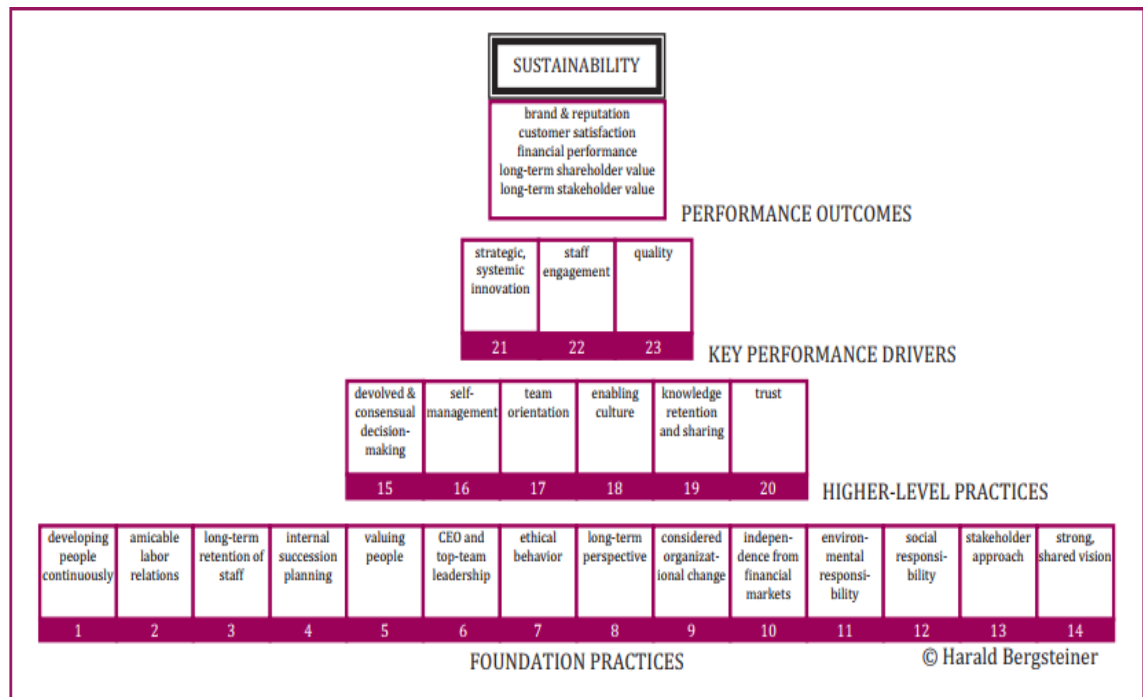
It was revealed that US management experts, among others, have been urging managers to adopt these practices of a honeybee, which are also known as the honeybee practices, over the years but these efforts are ignored in locust firms. The research evidence too

indicated that every practice under the general term of honeybees would be of significant value to any business including to its bottom line. Besides this, quite a number of managers are operating on sustainable leadership as observed by Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) on approximately 45 enterprises. The 23 practices of the honeybee have been put in the shape of a pyramid as a reference point of intervention (Figure 3). The practices can be grouped in three in the pyramid as foundation practices which are the practices at higher levels and key performance drivers. The fourth level that tops the pyramid has the performance outcomes that research indicates leads to sustainability:

**1. The bottom of the pyramid is comprised of foundation practices:** Introduction can be made at any given time that the management chooses to do so. The 14 base practices involve staff training and development programs, efforts to have friendly labor relations, staff retention (no layoffs), succession, understanding the value of experience and the role of employees in customer retention or loyalty as well as innovation, and deciding whether the CEO role should be to whether that is a hero or the best member of the top team, this is to be ethical, encourages long-term thinking, organization change is viewed sensitively, attempts to be independent of the financial market, promotes environmental and social responsibility, balancing interests of multiple stakeholders and this is to ensure that there is a common vision that drives the business.

**2. The second layer in the pyramid is higher level practices:** These six practices include devolved and consensual decision making, establishing self-managing employees, tapping the power of teams, establishing a culture of trust, building organizations culture that facilitates sustainable leadership, and sharing and retaining knowledge of the firm. The pyramid has been built upon the concept that, the emergence of the upper-level practices would be enabled and supported by the presence of the relevant foundation practices. Indicatively, it is foolish to pass decrees that employees would become self-managing without the involved people having gone through the relevant training to make them self-manage, knowing and

sharing the firm's vision, being in the firm long enough (and thus know the culture and create networks), are allowed to make decisions and feel valued. On the same note, trust could not easily be improved in a manner that skills could be improved since trust relies on how many of the foundation practices had been operational. Thus, self-management and trust are also higher-level practices that manifest in the pyramid as a result of a combination of various practices of the foundation.



**Figure 3:** Avery and Bergsteiner's Sustainable Leadership Pyramid Source: (Berry, 2007)

**3. The third level is developed by key performance drivers:** The innovation, staff engagement and quality essentially offer the end-customers experience and hence organizational performance. The crucial performance drivers in their turn are the result of different combinations of the upper and lower-level practices. One such body of research by Lakshman (2006) points to, as an example, a team orientation, skilled and empowered employees, and a culture supporting knowledge sharing and creating trust as increasing quality. These practices in their turn presuppose the existence of different foundation elements. Therefore, the key performance drivers are a result of both of lower-level practices.

**4. Performance outcomes:** The five performance outcomes in the top of the pyramid result in sustainable leadership. All the 23 levels of the different levels in the pyramid are driving:

- Credibility of brand and reputation.
- Increased customer satisfaction.
- Strong operating finances (Every company needs to survive financially even in the short-run).
- Long-term shareholder value.
- Multi-specific stakeholder value in the long run.

The pyramid is supposed to be dynamic in every direction. The interaction between the elements not only goes up and down, but also practices of the same level have an effect on each other. Moreover, the implementation aspects of the 23 practices allow the use of an enormous amount of variation, making it impossible to go universal. As an illustration, clearly a long-run survival issue is the need to be ethically operated (consider Enron and most other companies), but there are numerous ways in which senior executives can make sure that this occurs operationally. Sustainable leadership is based on complicated relationships among various practices. Short-term, it can be easier to lead based on the Anglo/US or shareholder-first model. Nonetheless, the sustainable leadership or Rhineland model is supported by a lot of research claiming that this model has resulted in improved performance outcomes in the long run as compared to the Anglo/US model (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2012). With that said, a sustainable leadership system will prove vulnerable because it can be upset by various outside influences, including mergers and acquisitions, by absorbing other large shareholders who do not share a sustainable mindset, or when a new CEO is introduced into the system who corrupts the current one. This may include such significant disruptions as laying off employees abruptly or having a short-term perspective on a problem. It may result in reduction in the number of trainings, environmental protection or social responsibility programs or dishonesty to please investors next quarter. Other non-sustainable practices that may be brought about by

short-termism include less investment on research and development or the interests of sources of income other than investors. Nearly without saying, the unintended organizational change and upheaval of a viable culture will be linked with the sacrifice of long-term success in favor of short-term victories.

Conversely, an informed long-term view perpetrates a commitment to be adaptive and innovative, which will allow an organization to get and train patient investors. Provided that the firm is able to accommodate any changes in its markets and emerging competitors, the staff will be preserved, the training will be sustained, the level of innovation and quality of the firm will remain high, the knowledge will be preserved, the interests of the stakeholders (including the environment and community) will be taken into consideration and the sudden poorly-thought change will be avoided.

## **2.6 The sustainable leadership measurement**

Sustainable leadership measurement is largely situated in two fields, which are education and business management. The field of education has a great number of researches. Using the qualitative analysis, through a comparison of the various methods of sustainable and unsustainable leadership in the schools, Hargreaves and Fink (2004) generalised sustainable leadership to be sustainable learning, environmental protection and social justice. Burns et al. (2015) explored sustainable leadership in the context of observation and selfawareness, reflection, ecological and diversity perspectives exploration, experience and community learning. Taumesci and Titrek (2019) further explored the issue of sustainable leadership has on lifelong learning in the educational sector and noted and posed questions regarding the enhancement of organizational vision, the implementation of social responsibility, and the establishment of ethical standards.

Regarding the quantitative research, Farooq and Ibrahim (2017) have created a 25-item questionnaire on sustainable leadership that has 4 items dimensions (staff capacity building, diversity, maintenance, and strategic leadership allocation) by using an exploratory factor analysis of 300 surveys (administered to administrative and academic staff) on the topic of sustainability of leadership excellence in the university, sample item: "My university offers staff training in leadership development programs.

Moreover, leadership behaviors that enhance sustainability in schools have been explored too using both qualitative and quantitative ways including Lambert (2012) who tested a sustainable leadership framework of colleges of continuing education by interviewing and administering questionnaires to gather data that comprised 6 factors, including developing staff capacity, strategy and partnership building, developing long-term goals out of short-term goals, diversifying workplace and curriculum development. The recent studies in the business management discipline have primarily applied the quantitative methodology, e.g., Avery and Bergsteiner (2011a) who developed a series of sustainable leadership questionnaires comprising 57 measures founded on 23 practices of sustainable leadership. The validity of this questionnaire was verified by Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2014) using a sample of 1,152 Thai SME employees. A 10-item sustainable leadership questionnaire was created by Dalati (2015), sample item: I understand well what leadership is all about. In 5 dimensions, Lee (2017) metrics sustainable leadership are cohesive diversity, organizational justice, employee development, advancement orientation and work-life balance, where each dimension is measured on a scale of 2 questions, sample item: My supervisor is effective in employees with different backgrounds. McCann and Holt (2010) made a sustainable leadership questionnaire of sustainable leadership thinking and ten pillars of sustainable leadership (e.g., social and environmental awareness, adaptability, patience), which included 15 questions; sample question: my leader is concerned about the impact that sustainability has on employees. Since then, this questionnaire has been distributed in numerous other studies like McCann and Sweet (2014), Al-Zawahreh et al. (2019), Iqbal et al. (2020b), and Javed et al. (2020). Despite the fact that more questionnaires can be used to measure sustainable leadership, the 15-item questionnaire designed by McCann and Holt (2010) has been better identified and put into practice by academics.

## **2.7 Linking Sustainable Leadership to Organizational Performance**

Sustainable leadership concept is based on the ability to look beyond conventional leadership paradigms by literally embedding long-term environmental, social, and economic

values into managerial action and strategy. The connection between this developed variant of leadership and the improved performance of the organization is strong and multidimensional and it works in both direct and indirect directions leading to financial prosperity, strengthening of reputation and development of strategic resilience. Sustainable leaders are those who get a balanced decision that is both profitable, and at the same time offers justice and environmental safety to the society (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011, p. 36). This is when this holistic approach is not at the cost of performance, it establishes a more lasting and better form of performance. Incorporating sustainability in the corporate vision, these leaders enable value creation because they promote innovation, operational efficiency, reduce long-term risks that many managers focus on only in profit-maximizing models, which are short-term in nature.

The most important way by which sustainable leadership impacts performance is in creating a culture of human capital growth and involvement of employees, and this directly affects productivity and innovation. High commitment and a competent workforce are developed through sustainable leadership practices that include granting job security, investing in employee development and improvement of employee wellbeing. It has been found out that these high-road human resource practices have a high correlation with best organizational results such as increased innovation and overall performance (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011, p. 47). In the case when employees feel appreciated and view their work as positive social or environmental goal, their intrinsic motivation and organizational citizenship behaviour becomes significant. This motivated force turns into a potent generator of operational excellence and proactive problem solving that has a direct effect on the bottom line and helps to decrease the expenditures on high turnover and lack of motivation.

Moreover, sustainable leadership develops vast intangible resources that are essential in creating competitive advantage in the new market, which mainly manifests as the improved brand reputation, stakeholder trust, and risk management. With the growing

transparency, the social and environmental report of a business is one of the major factors that define its brand equity and customer loyalty. When leaders focus on ethical behaviors, taking care of the environment, and participating in the community with sincerity, they develop a trust bank with the customers, investors, and regulators. This credibility is converted into practical financial gains, since companies with high sustainability results obtain a social license to function, which would enable easier market entry, investment, and price premiums (Eccles et al., 2014, p. 76). In addition, sustainable leaders can also prevent reputational loss, regulatory fines, and operational issues by taking the initiative to manage environmental and social risks, such as climate impacts, supply chain disruptions, etc., and therefore can ensure a more stable and predictable long-term performance.

## **2.8 The antecedents of sustainable leadership**

The other scholars have talked less about the antecedents of sustainable leadership and the studies conducted are principal in two aspects; individual and organizational contextual factors. Regarding personal elements, Taşçi and Titrek (2019) and Armani et al. (2020) indicated that the advancement of the self-awareness of managers could contribute to sustainable leadership, since the cultivation of sustainability depended on how managers perceived the world and the value, they attached to some organizational behaviors that brought the questions of ethicality. According to Cheng et al. (2021), numerous personal traits, including humility, cognition, and integrity, could also promote sustainable leadership, yet this was more likely to be promoted in highly ethical organizations. Regarding organizational contextual variables, Shaaban (2020) addressed the idea of responsible leadership and sustainable leadership and empirically tested it on 250 employees and leaders in 18 companies in Egypt and proved the facilitative impact of sustainable leadership on responsible leadership.

## **2.9 The outcomes of sustainable leadership**

Even though the earlier researchers have observed that the effects of sustainable leadership may be realized at personal, group, organizational, and social levels, the current empirical studies have mainly analyzed the individual and organizational level.

### **2.9.1 Individual level**

The effects of sustainable leadership on employees are directly experienced in two categories; cognition and behavior. In cognitive dimension, Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2014) said that 20 of 23 practices of sustainable leadership could contribute to the job satisfaction of the employees in a significant way. Similarly, some of the sustainable leadership practices suggested by Lee (2017) to be significant predictor variables of employee satisfaction included work and family balance, which Çayak and Çetin (2018) found to be predictive of high degrees of organizational commitment and job satisfaction of the teachers. Dalati et al. (2017) also investigated the role of sustainable leadership among teachers and discovered that sustainable leadership has the power of raising the amount of trust that the employees have towards the organization. Shaaban (2020) made an argument in terms of behavior, suggesting that sustainable leadership enhanced the behavior of employees hence turning them into responsible employees. Moreira et al. (2022) were sure that sustainable leadership allows employees to think that the organization was interested in them and appreciated their competency development, therefore, decreasing their intentions to exit.

### **2.9.2 Organizational level**

On the organizational level, most of the consequences of sustainable leadership are indicated by performance related variables and the interdependence of the two has been given more consideration by scholars. Indicatively, Avery and Bergsteiner (2011b) added that sustainable leadership generated 5 performance related results, which included reputation, customer satisfaction, finances, shareholder value, and long-term value of

various stakeholders. They also mentioned the capacity of sustainable leadership to enhance organizational resilience. A sample consisting of Thai SMEs (n=58) in an empirical study by Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2016) supported a weighty affirmative association among 16 of the 23 sustainable leadership practices and corporate financial performance. Lee (2017), Sezginartgun et al. (2020) also in their studies suggested that sustainable leadership can increase organizational performance. The consequences of sustainable leadership have been mostly attributed by scholars to organizational sustainability in recent times. Burawat (2019) and Iqbal et al. (2020a,b) investigated the impact of sustainable leadership in organizations with many SMEs in various countries, and discovered that a positive effect of sustainable leadership on sustainable performance existed. Moreover, the positive association between sustainable leadership and sustainable performance was verified by Fatoki in his analysis based on a sample of the hotel companies (Fatoki, 2021). Empirical research by Javed et al. (2020) and Iqbal et al. (2020a) using numerous SMEs in the Asian coastal states had demonstrated that sustainable leadership influenced the environmental performance positively. In addition, the researchers have further elaborated on how the sustainable leadership effect works on the performance-related consequences by using the mediating variables and moderating variables. Upon the research above we come up with a sustainable leadership research structure. And the research prospects also has the related contents in the research framework.

## **2.10 Challenges and Opportunities in Sustainable Strategic Leadership**

Sustainable strategic leadership is the combination of long-term environmental, social, and governance (ESG) in the most senior corporate strategy and decision-making. Although this strategy is becoming widely accepted as a key party to resilience and value, leaders who choose this journey have a complex terrain of great difficulties as they are met by transformational opportunities. This is a delicate course that must be negotiated by a delicate comprehension of internal and external pressures that have characterized the contemporary business landscape.

The range of challenges that leaders who regard themselves as sustainable have to endure is an uphill task, with one of the main ones being the constant demand of immediate monetary outcomes. This tends to clash straight with the long-term perspectives of investment needed to make sustainability efforts, like switching to renewable energy or constructing fair supply chains. According to Linnenluecke and Griffiths (2013), one of the main obstacles is the perceived conflict between the economic performance and corporate sustainability, which may cause internal resistance among boards and investors interested in quarterly earnings (p. 387). Moreover, leaders have to deal with a sense of deep complexity and uncertainty as the sustainability problems are usually systemic, and even have no distinct data or effective solutions. This is further augmented by internal cultural resistance, in which the presence of the organizational routines coupled with the inability of the middle management to be sustainability literate is able to suffocate the execution of strategic objectives (Haffar and Searcy, 2017, p. 12). The massive scale of the process of changing whole business models, not incremental ones, requires a degree of change management and strategic patience that puts traditional leadership to the test.

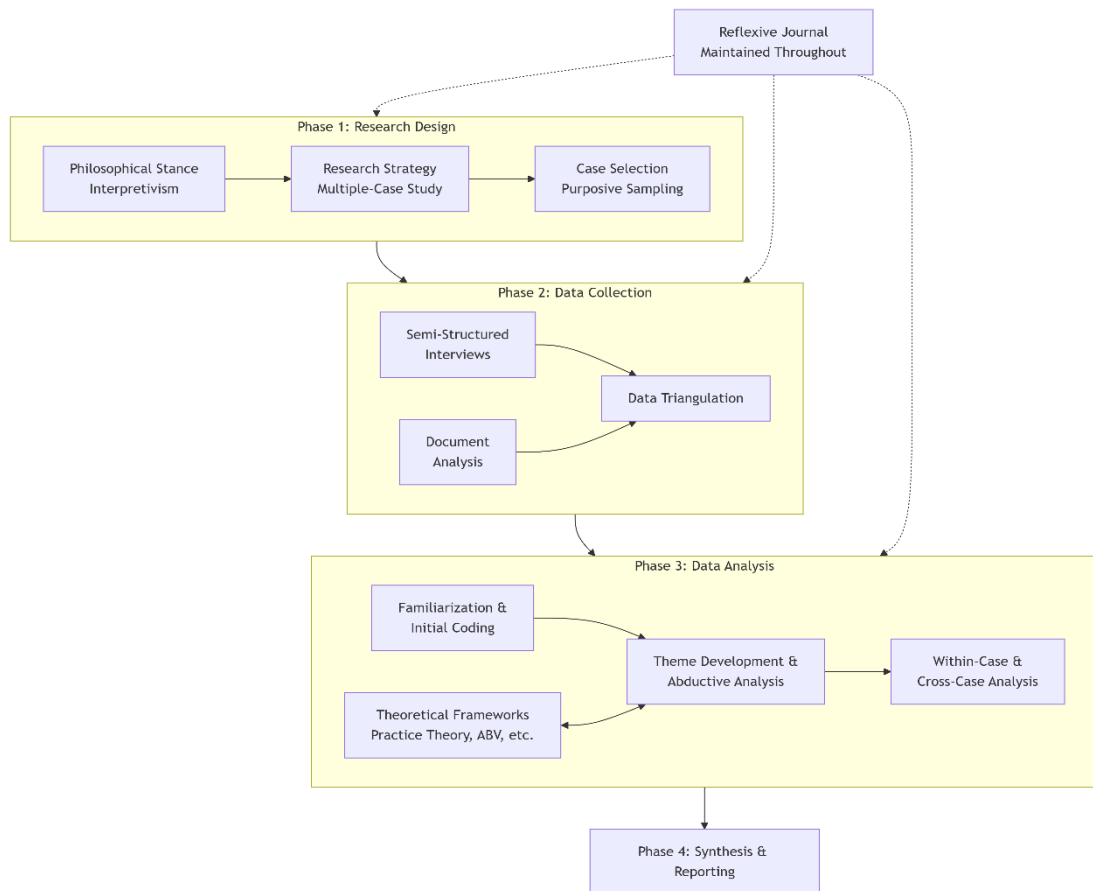
Through the mentioned huge challenges, sustainable strategic leadership offers unmatched opportunities so as to establish a stronger, more innovative, and competitive organization. One of the main opportunities is to lead radical innovation and open new markets. The limitations caused by the sustainability objectives can serve as an effective motivator to innovation, compelling companies to rebrand products, services, and processes in such a manner that introduces additional revenue streams. As an example, a circular economy strategy may result in new business models that are founded on leasing, remanufacturing, and sterilization, which are not tied to growth and consumption of resources. In addition to that, strong sustainability strategy is an essential risk mitigation and future-proofing the organization tool. Leaders have a chance to enhance supply chain resilience, prevent regulatory fines, and save their brand image through proactive management of such problems as climate change, resource shortage, and social inequity

(Eccles et al., 2014, p. 76). This futuristic thinking will see the company survive in the global upheavals that would have paralyzed other less prepared businesses.

Finally, the greatest opportunity is possibly the capability to attract and retain best talent and develop deep trust with the stakeholders. In a world where everyone can see, purpose and values of a company are very important. An authentic upholding of sustainability driven by top management creates a strong sense of mission in the staff resulting to increased involvement, performance, and retention. Outwardly, it also creates invaluable social license to operate, which enhances relationships with customers, communities and investors, who are progressively basing their decisions on their values. Thus, the issue of sustainable strategic leadership is quite actual and challenging, but it is much more than a chance to reinvent corporate success and generate sustainable value to all stakeholders, which would secure the legitimacy and success of the organization over decades.

### 3 Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological framework that was used to address the research question: How does sustainable strategic leadership influence the realization of organizational goals? is outlined. The interpretivist philosophy was used to adopt a qualitative approach of a multiple-case study design, where the aim was to get a rich, subjective reality of leaders having sustainability strategies. The methodology combines semi-structured interviews and document review as part of a purposely chosen sample of organizations, which guarantees a level of in-depth understanding of modern practices. The following paragraphs elaborate on the research design, data collection procedures, and the intensive process of thematic analysis that informed this study, the process of which was informed by an abductive reasoning and theoretical framework to the end product which was a visual representation of the general methodology.



**Figure 4:** An Orderly Flowchart of the Research Methods Used in the Study

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study assumes the qualitative research design which involves multiple-case study methodology. A case study approach is chosen because it is specifically adapted to studying a modern phenomenon (how) in the context of its life manifestation, in particular, when the demarcation between the phenomenon and the context is not so much obvious (Yin, 2018). The multiple-case design enables conducting a comparative analysis, which increases the strength and external validity of the results due to the replication of the research in the case of different settings (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

This design is based on the interpretivism research philosophy. This paradigm would be suitable because it would attempt to find out the complex and subjective meanings that organizational leaders attribute to SSL and its effect, and not to seek a single objective truth (Saunders et al., 2019).

#### **3.1.1 Case Selection Criteria**

Four organizations belonging to various industries (manufacturing, technology, professional services, and retail) that were publicly acknowledged to be sustainable were identified using a purposive sampling strategy. The most important criterion selection criterion was demonstration of the highest executive level commitment to sustainability (e.g., signed ESG pledges, published sustainability reports with long term objectives) and an expressed desire to become a part of core strategy. The latter made it possible to investigate SSL in those situations when it was an overt goal to achieve a detailed analysis of the implementation processes and issues.

#### **3.1.2 Analytical Process**

The thematic analysis frameworks as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) of six phases were used in data analysis with the help of NVivo software. The process of coding was

divided into three phases: (1) the open coding to determine the sustainability-related leadership activities; (2) the axial coding to establish the links between the themes (e.g., stakeholder engagement, symbolic acts, system redesign) and the outcomes of leadership; (3) and selective coding to form major theoretical categories. The cross-case comparisons allowed determining the patterns of configuration between leadership practices and sustainability outcomes.

### **3.1.3 Reflexivity and Inter-Coder Reliability**

A secondary coder was also used to review 20 percent of the material coded to ensure analytical rigor and consensus discussions were used to resolve discrepancies resulting in an inter-coder agreement of 0.85 (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Memo-writing and reflection journals were used to sustain reflexivity, and in recognition of the interpretive position of the researcher and his/her possible bias to positive sustainability stories.

### **3.1.4 Cognitive Ethnography and Configurational Thinking**

Following the work of Fiss (2007), the configurational thinking was used to describe the interaction of various leadership conditions, such as ethical orientation, inclusion of stakeholders and performance incentives, to achieve the sustainability outcomes. Also, the Cognitive Ethnography (Hutchins, 1995) was used to guide the interpretation of the way leaders think about the context and act thus, as cognition is distributed in sustainability teams.

## **3.2 Data Collection Methods**

In order to have methodological triangulation and create a holistic picture, two primary sources of data will be gathered:

**Semi-structured Interviews:** In-depth and semi-structured interviews with the key leadership staff (e.g. CEOs, Sustainability Officers, HR Directors) in each case study organization conducted to receive primary data. This approach enables both targeted and open-

ended discussion and permits the researcher to go into detail of the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Kallio et al., 2016). The conversations directed by an interview protocol that will address the themes of the interpretation of the definition of the SSL, its investment into the strategy and the perceived results. Interviews were going to be audio-taped and transcribed word-to-word.

**Document Analysis:** The Secondary data was collected consist of the organizational documents, such as annual reports, sustainability reports, strategic plans, and official corporate communications. Analysis of documents is a reliable, non-intrusive source of data and may be used to support and put in context the evidence provided in the interviews and offers an indication of the formal correspondence of said SSL principles and strategic goals (Bowen, 2009).

### 3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis was the method used to analyze the data, and it is a step-by-step systematic procedure as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Nonetheless, the principles of abductive analysis were added to this process (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), whereby, going back and forth through the empirical and the theoretical frameworks (practice theory, ABV, institutional work) was necessary to create a more nuanced explanation.

**The procedure of analysis was as follows:**

- **Familiarization:** Reading the data by reading the transcripts and documents several times.
- **Initial Coding:** Creating first codes of leadership behavior and performance. This was done systematically using NVivo software. To improve reliability, two coders independently coded a 20 percent sample of the data and the inter-coder reliability score of 88 percent was attained after discussion.
- **Development of themes:** Categorizing codes as possible themes. In this case we specifically sought the evidence of the theoretical concepts; practices, attention-shaping, institutional work, and paradox management.

- **Reviewing and Defining Themes:** Fine tuning of themes so that they make a coherent pattern. Each organization was first analyzed within a case in order to comprehend the specific setting of the organization. This was then preceded by a cross-case study, which takes a configurational thinking approach (Fiss, 2007) in discovering the way in which various combinations of leadership practices and situational factors had a common result.
- **Creation of the Report:** Stitching the thematic analysis into a narrative (with references to the literature in direct quotes).

### **3.4 Limitations of the Study**

Although this is a strong methodology to use in an exploratory study, there are some limitations that are admitted. The results are locally apt but not statistically applicable to a broader group of people. Interviews based on the perception of participants can also lead to recall or social desirability bias. But these limitations are reduced by employing data triangulation and multi-case design as they help to furnish the depth and emerging theoretical ideas that are based on empirical evidence.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

In this chapter the empirical results of the work are given and the critical discussion of their relevance is made. Based on the information about the interviews and organizational papers, the results are organized according to the most fundamental themes that were identified during the analysis process, and they demonstrate how sustainable strategic leadership can be reflected in practice and how it impacts the achievement of organizational goals. These findings are then discussed in the integrated theoretical framework of practice theory, the attention-based perspective, and institutional work and it goes beyond the description to explain the underlying processes through which leadership produces sustainable results through cognitive re-framing, practice embedding, and institutional entrepreneurship. This evidence synthesis and theory give a subtle response to the overall research question.

“It was not only not a financial choice when I chose to relate 20 percent of executive bonuses to the cutting of carbon—it was a symbolic choice. It informed the whole world that performance is sustainability”. (CEO, Manufacturing Case A)

This quote is the good example of how symbolic leadership actions can build organizational thinking (Weick, 2005), which upholds sustainability as a performance standard. The differentiation reveals that sustainability was implemented in the manufacturing firm by technological innovation and supply chain ethics, and in the service-oriented case, by staff welfare and community relations. The following differences indicate the situational flexibility of SSL.

Mechanisms discovered (Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010):

- **Cognitive Mechanism:** The communication of leaders transformed sustainability into a logic of creating value.
- **Institutional Mechanism:** The institutionalized sustainability practices were based on ESG-based incentives.

- **Cultural Mechanism:** By the use of symbolic leadership and employee empowerment, sustainability was not only a management program but became a way of life.

The symbolic activities of the leaders which included them cleaning up the community by themselves, were cognitive anchors that recast the attention of the employees (Weick, 2005) towards sustainability objectives.

#### **4.1 Influence of Sustainable Leadership on Organizational Goals**

The empirical study shows that the effects of Sustainable Strategic Leadership (SSL) are extensive and multi-dimensional, essentially transforming the kind of them and increasing the capability of the organization to achieve its organizational objectives. The results reveal that the main effect is not a single one, but more of a transformative process, which re-aligns the organization to creation of long-term value. One of the key themes that can be identified in the data is that the concept of success has changed to be more comprehensive and resilient, which incorporates not only economic but also social and environmental outcomes. Leaders who promoted the idea of sustainability were always observed to re-focus strategic debate by looking beyond immediate return on investment and looking at how the decision impacts on long-term risk, brand image and social license to operate by the organization. This can be directly attributed to the theoretical conflict between profitability and sustainability, and this realignment is evident in corporate reports that would connect the strategic goals with particular ESG KPIs, making SSL an important instrument of balancing the short-term actions with the long-term organizational mission.

Moreover, the research concludes that the application of the SSL has a strong positive impact on the strategic alignment and internal cohesion as a factor that brings departmental actions into synchronization. The vision, which sustainable leaders are able to articulate and which is value-based, offers a moral compass or guide to organizational

decision-making on all organizational levels. Middle-manager interview data also indicated that multi-functional and complex objectives, like the adherence to the principles of a circular economy, were possible due to the shared vision of the high-level why that led to a better collaboration between R&D, production and marketing than ever. Its in-house consistency which minimizes friction and competing priorities ensures that day-to-day operations and tactical decision making is inherently connected to the strategic vision which makes the organization much efficient and focused in its quest of achieving important goals.

Lastly, the role of SSL is also of paramount importance in the creation of organizational resilience and adaptability ability, which is of direct impact on the long-term goal accomplishment, particularly in uncertain settings. The figures indicate that leaders who are proactive in practicing SSL are able to control environmental and social risks, which are associated with the increased stability in their operations. An example of this is the ethical sourcing fortified supply chains resistant to global disruptions as well as putting an emphasis on employee welfare and growth that created a highly engaged and flexible workforce. This observation highlights that the intangible goods that are cultivated by the presence of SSL like stakeholder trust, employee loyalty and a healthy brand image are not simply collateral goods but they are real-life issues that lead to performance and competitive advantage. Leading sustainably creates a culture of innovation, ethical governance, and care that makes an organization resilient enough to continue on its path to long-term objectives despite external shocks and uncertainty in the marketplace.

#### **4.1.1 Reconceptualizing Performance and Shifting the Focus**

Among the central conclusions, it is important to state that the leaders actively redefine the concept of organizational success. This is an obvious case of organizational cognition shaping. According to one of the CEOs, he needed to put aside the discussion on the business case of sustainability and discuss the sustainable way of doing business. It is not a distinct project; it is the prism that decides how all the projects are looked through

[Quote of CEO, Company B]. The operationalization of this discursive move was by implementing ESG measures into the executive dashboard thus officially redirection of the organizational focus (Ocasio, 1997) of the top managers.

#### **4.1.2 Institutional Work Strategic Alignment**

The use of the SSL also enhanced the measure of strategic alignment by institutional work which was intended. Sustainability Innovation Leaders developed new cross-functional committees which were assigned the responsibility of sustainability innovation a practice which established new relations structures. One middle manager remarked, sustainability used to be the issue of the ESG group. Now there is the innovation fund and my R&D team will be rewarded through bonuses based on the innovation fund. It has revolutionized our priorities altogether. [Quote of the R&D Manager, Company A]. This demonstrates that leaders have developed new routinized practices (Jarzabkowski, 2005), which have entrenched sustainability within the primary workflow, reducing friction and competing priorities.

#### **4.2 Leadership Practices that Enhance Sustainability**

The study has revealed a set of leadership practices which are core and which actively support and institutionalize sustainability in organizations. These practices are taken a step further by ensuring that the principles of Sustainable Strategic Leadership are implemented into practical actions and business results. One of the practices that have been observed throughout the cases is the explicit and integrated use of sustainability in the main strategic conversation and decision-making. The leaders of the study did not consider sustainability as a distinct and detached project but incorporated it into the discussion of finances, operations, and market development. This was formalized by using formal mechanisms like inclusion of ESG measure in executive dashboards and performance reviews and informally through the language of leadership used that was always related to the daily operations and long-term sustainability interest. An example

cited is that one CEO mentioned reframing the notion of capital expenditure into mandating a consideration of environmental impact and social benefit in addition to the more usual monetaries, therefore making sustainable thinking to be an uncompromising part of strategic resource allocation.

Proactive and genuine stakeholder engagement is another important practice. The leaders who successfully promoted sustainability displayed a shift in checking with reporting to facilitation with a wide group of stakeholders such as employees, suppliers, local communities and regulators. This was not an irrelevant peripheral PR operation but a fundamental leadership role of sensing impending risks and opportunities and developing legitimacy. The information provided by interviews showed that leaders took time personally in such interactions, visiting the community locations and conducting open forums with employees on issues of sustainability. This art of listening to the periphery enabled the organizations to predict the changing demands and position their sustainability initiatives at the foundation of the real society needs thus developing more sound and broadly backed plans. This observation is a direct indication of the theoretical focus on stakeholder relationship as a pillar of sustainable value creation.

Moreover, empowerment and symbolic action proved to be a crucial leadership practice as they developed supportive organizational culture. It was identified that sustainable leaders served as role models, whose actions, including being energy efficient, promoting ethical sourcing, or showing concern to the welfare of their employees, provided a strong message of the values in the organization. In addition to modelling, they actively empowered employees by granting them the resources, freedom and psychological safety to explore sustainable solutions. The research leaders advocated internal green teams, supported sustainability innovation studios, and celebrated achievements and positive failures. This ownership devolution at the top through to bottom of the organization was essential in shifting the initiative of sustainability that is dependent on a leader to a cultural norm that is engrained into an organization and that sustainability will not deteriorate with the change of a leader.

#### **4.2.1 Symbolic Action and Integrative Practice**

The explicit application of sustainability into the strategy talk was something that was continually being done. This has been done in most cases with symbolic acts that were weighty. An example is where a leader who uses train rather than aircraft to meet employees in the country created a strong myth in the organization, which indicates that he is genuinely committed. This ritual practice supported the official communication.

#### **4.2.2 Active Stakeholder Investment as Institutional work**

Engaging actively with stakeholders was not a periphery event, but an institutional work practice, as well as a relationship engagement practice. Leaders interacted with the communities and suppliers not only to report, but also to co-create solutions, which they establish legitimacy and provide a supportive external environment to their sustainability ambitions. One of the things I do is to go on a day in a month with our major suppliers without auditing them, but just solving the problem with them on how to downsize the packaging. The risk that reduces is our largest risk mitigation measure," a Supply Chain Director [Quote from Supply Chain Director, Company C].

### **4.3 Empirical Observations**

The empirical evidence collected in the case studies gives tangible examples of the way in which sustainable leadership principles are implemented and the real impact that they generate. Among the notable ones was the strategic re-imagination of performance management systems to reward sustainability results. One of the manufacturing companies has explicitly stated that a major part of executive and managerial reward packages is relative to meeting pre-set goals and targets when it comes to carbon emissions reduction and employee safety measures. This direct connectivity relocated sustainability as a rhetorical promise into a material aspect of compensation and had a decisive impact on the managerial behavior and focus. Internal reports of this corporation indicated a

significant increase in the rate of switching to energy-saving technologies and the tangible reduction in workplace accidents after the introduction of this updated incentive system, which can prove the role of leadership lever in the implementation of practical operational changes.

The second important observation is in terms of the leadership style of innovation and risk-taking. A case study in a technology company, the CEO had established an official sustainability innovation fund, in which he had set a set percentage of the R&D budget, specifically devoted to projects that met societal or environmental needs. This provided a secure environment where engineers and product developers would discuss ideas which may not have such a short-term profit motive. This practice resulted empirically in the creation of a new and water saving component that was later to be a significant unique selling point in the ecologically conscious markets. This fact highlights the role of leaders in building responsible innovation in a structural manner that can not only turn sustainability limitations into a competitive advantage but also takes a direction towards the theoretical argument that responsible leadership leads to the creation of long-term value.

Moreover, firsthand observations based on the transcripts of the interviews indicated a unified trend in leadership communication that viewed sustainability as a non-cost, but as a national and value-driven entity of the company. Internal company-wide meetings allowed the leaders to repeat Poland and tell stories that related the individual employee work to the overall sustainability mission. Indicatively, one of the logistics managers was publicly praised because he transformed a delivery route that reduced the fuel use and the leader specifically linked the success to the twofold advantages of saving money and safeguarding the environment. Such a coherent story, found in various communication mediums, was used to make sustainability familiar, valuable, and personally connected to employees, and this culture of engagement and intrinsic motivation, which was not confined to official policies and measures, prevailed.

### **4.3.1 Mechanism: Relating Rewards to Behavior Change**

The strategic re-imagination of performance management was a very strong observation. One of the manufacturing organizations bound 20 percent of executive pay to carbon reduction goals. The HR Head described how it works: all of a sudden, I was receiving calls about solar power about which the plant managers government had no interest before whatsoever. It converted the discussion to night. [Quote of the HR Director, Company A]. This shows how the shift in a formal practice (compensation) had a direct impact on managerial attention and behaviour.

### **Finding a way out of Paradox with Dedicated Structures**

The sustainability innovation fund of the technology company is an excellent example of structural mechanism of control of paradox of exploratory sustainability R&D, and exploitative, profit-seeking R&D. The leader developed a so-called protected space (Kemp et al., 1998) which caused the tension to be relieved by ring-fencing the budget so that responsible innovation could thrive. This contributed to the creation of a water saving product which made a sustainability limitation a source of competitive advantage.

## **4.4 Discussion in Relation to Existing Literature**

The results of this research strike a chord with and are of major relevance to the current literature on the subject of sustainable leadership. The reorientation of the short-term profit to long-term value creation is a strong empirical support of the arguments of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) and Eccles et al. (2014) as the theoretical arguments. Although these scholars have postulated that sustainable leadership principles improve resilience and performance, this study explains the process, which is; the deliberate re-framing of strategic dialogue and performance measures by leaders to incorporate ESG factors into the core decision-making procedures. This solves the severe problem that Epstein and Buhovac (2014) noted where the long-term sustainability objectives are inconsistent

with the short-term financial objectives, and proves that leaders can actively redesign organizational systems to address the gap.

In addition, the stakeholder engagement and cultural empowerment as identified practices of leadership provide a fine-grained, practical approach to the conceptual frameworks of Ramakrishnan (2025) and Hargreaves and Fink (2004). The empirical data proves that the two abstract ideas (Systems Thinking and Stakeholder Engagement) are carried out by conscious efforts like leaders engaging with the community stakeholders individually and establishing secure innovation zones among employees. It is consistent with and develops the insights of responsible leadership, as presented by Pless and Maak (2011) and Miska et al. (2016), that trust is a relational process that requires an active approach and generates tangible strategic results, including the creation of a more resilient supply chain and a stronger social license to operate.

Lastly, the empirical evidences of incentive systems and cultural discourses are critical elements of the institutionalization of sustainable leadership. The results prove the thesis of Engert et al. (2016) that the incorporation of sustainability in strategic management is the key, and this research defines the potent instruments of this phenomenon: i.e., the connectivity between executive compensation and sustainability KPIs and the use of strategic communication to promote the idea of sustainability as a part of organizational identity. This shifts the debate to the leadership systems and the formal and informal routine, rituals, and rewards employed by the leaders to make the sustainability last longer than them. This study, therefore, does not only confirm the theoretical association between sustainable leadership and organizational performance, but also offers a more detailed, more practical insight into what exactly it is about the behaviors of leaders and the organizational structures that facilitate such connection.

The findings of this study are very much consistent and compatible with existing literature. These findings on re-framing goals and strategic alignment give the arguments of

Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) and Eccles et al. (2014) the empirical content, but this time on the range of the mechanism of attention-shaping and institutional work.

#### 4.4.1 Theoretical Synthesis

As shown in this study, the working mechanisms of the SSL have been triadic with three processes interacting:

- **Cognitive Re-framing:** This is a form of communication and metrics used by leaders to re-focus organizational attention towards sustainability (Ocasio, 1997).
- **Practice Embedding:** They internalize this new emphasis in terms of new routinized practices such as new performance management and innovation funds (Jarzabkowski, 2005).
- **Institutional Entrepreneurship:** They can use the stakeholder and cultural empowerment in institutional work to establish and establish a new sustainability-based logic in the company (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

This framework goes past the assertion that leadership is important, to how it is important, the micro-processes of change. It also considers a realistic recognition of the paradoxical tensions (Smith and Lewis, 2011), indicating that the practices observed are usually complex reactions to these underlying tensions, and not their easy solutions.

## 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This concluding chapter draws conclusions of the main findings of the thesis in order to elaborate the overall findings of the study to provide the responses on the main research question of the influence of sustainable strategic leadership (SSL) on organizational objectives directly. It summarizes the evidence to confirm that SSL is a transformative force, which essentially realigns goals, contributes to general resilience, and entrenches sustainability using particular cognitive and practical processes. It is on these conclusions that the chapter subsequently provides practical organizational practice recommendations and suggestive avenues of future academic research to expand on this work.

### 5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The main research question that this thesis aimed to address was the following one: How does sustainable strategic leadership affect the attainment of organizational goals? The analysis produced a number of important results, which, taken collectively, display a deep and transformative effect.

To begin with, sustainable strategic leadership was discovered to fundamentally reposition the organizational objectives in a narrow orientational approach towards short-term financial gains to a more extended and resistant long-term value-generating approach. Leaders do so by integrating the environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards in strategic dialogue, planning and key performance indicators and thus aligning economic goals with social and environmental welfare.

Second, this leadership style strengthens the strategic alignment and internal unity. Sustainable leaders established a cohesive and integrated, moral compass by creating a vivid, value-driven vision and cultivating systems thinking, which coordinates the activities of various departments. This minimizes internal friction and makes sure that tactical, day-to-day decision-making throughout the organization will always be in line with the overall organization strategic goals.

Third, the study discovered that sustainable strategic leadership is among the determinants in the establishment of organizational resilience and adaptive capacity. A proactive strategy that empowers the organization in response to external shocks is environmental and social risk management and investment in the wellbeing of the staff and ethical supply chains. The intangible assets that are built on the practices by trust, loyalty and good reputation are proven to be the key sources of the long-term performance and competitive advantage.

Finally, the paper has described the unquestionable, viable practices that actualize this leadership. These include the formal introduction of sustainability into the performance incentives and R&D budgets, genuine involvement of an enormous range of stakeholders, and direct employee empowerment as co-owners of the sustainability agenda. These practices change the leadership commitment into organizational culture and actual outcomes in such a way that the sustainability can become the permanent constituent of organizational identity and approach.

## **5.2 Implications for Theory and Practice**

The study implications of the research on managerial operations are enormous to both theory and practice in bridging the gap between theory and practice.

### **5.2.1 Theoretical Implications**

To theory, the study offers a much-needed empirical support and elucidation of some important concepts in the literature of sustainable leadership. To begin with, it goes beyond creating a correlation between sustainable leadership and performance to outline the answer of what causal mechanisms are at work. The paper clearly explains the roles of the reorientation of goal, strengthening strategic alignment and establishing resilience as the mediating mechanisms through which the leadership works to determine the organizational results. This fills a severe gap that exists in the literature and provides a more

detailed insight into the how of the theoretical propositions of researchers such as Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) and Eccles et al. (2014).

Secondly, the results add to the meaning of the Strategic Alignment in the framework of sustainability. It shows that alignment does not simply mean the coordination of resources to a financial goal, but rather the establishment of a coherence that is based on values and cuts across departmental silos. This broadens the traditional strategic management theory in that it demonstrates that a sustainability-based vision can be a stronger integrating mechanism than the economic objectives alone and such creates a more comprehensive level of organizational loyalty and cooperation.

Lastly, the paper reinforces the discussion of Responsible Leadership and the Stakeholder Theory because it presents tangible evidence of their strategic usefulness. The proactive stakeholder engagement practices and ethical governance observed are demonstrated not only to be morally but also strategically necessary to mitigate risks and engage in innovation and social license to operate. This positions stakeholder management as a periphery communications company to a fundamental strategic leadership capability.

### **5.2.2 Practical Implications**

As a practitioner, this research provides a practical roadmap towards making sustainability central to the leadership and strategy. One of the main implications is that leaders need to go beyond rhetoric and put structural changes into practice. This also involves the physical incorporation of sustainability measures in the performance management and compensation systems as experienced in the case studies. To ensure that ESG KPIs can make a positive and significant behavioral change, boards and top management need to require that these indicators receive equal weighting to financial ones in strategic reviews and bonus calculations.

Moreover, the study highlights the significance of cultural change that is spearheaded by leaders. The role model is something that executives need to undertake consciously, and through their communication platforms, they need to talk about what the relationship between day-to-day activities and the overall sustainability mission is all about. They must also be proactive in delegating ownership through institutionalized avenues, including innovation funds and cross-functional green teams to enable all employees to make contributions towards sustainability objectives. This makes sustainability a bottom-up rather than a top-down organizational value.

Finally, the findings could be very useful in making a case to invest in resilience. The leaders are urged to not consider investments in employee well-being, ethical sourcing, and community relations as bequests, but as strategic investments that create intangible critical assets. These are demonstrated as assets of trust and strong workforce, which act as buffers to volatility and source of long term and sustainable competitive advantage. This provides a practical lingo to sustainability advocates in the organizational setting to gain resource mobilization and board-level approvals.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Organizations**

According to the empirical results of the current research, the following practical recommendations can be made to the organizations that want to make use of the potential of Sustainable Strategic Leadership:

#### **5.3.1 Incorporate Sustainability into Heart of manager Systems**

Sustainability should be formally and systematically incorporated into organizations in terms of strategic planning, performance management, and compensation structures. It includes the shift of standalone sustainability reports to the inclusion of concrete measurable ESG objectives to the annual goals of the business units and departments. We suggest that executive and managerial bonus plans should be overtly based on the at-

tainment of these integrated targets, which will send a clear message that the performance of sustainability is inseparably connected to the success of a business and professional growth.

### **5.3.2 Grow Leadership on all levels through Proactive Training**

The CEO cannot be the only person to be in charge of sustainable leadership. Companies have to invest into building sustainability competencies at every level of management. This involves planning and execution of leadership development programs on systems thinking, stakeholder engagement and creation of long-term value. Moreover, there should be mentorship and sponsorship initiatives to identify and train upcoming leaders who can exhibit the ability of incorporating ethical and sustainability considerations in their decision making to maintain a stream of leaders who can continue to embrace this strategy.

### **5.3.3 Organise Empowerment and Innovation Structures**

As a way of transforming leadership commitment into mass organizational action, the management ought to establish formal structures of participation of employees that are resourced. Our suggestions include the development of cross-functional sustainability task forces or so-called innovation incubators with separate budgets to investigate other ideas. In addition, leaders ought to utilize open systems of getting and following on sustainability recommendations by all employees and publicly acknowledge and reward those contributions that lead to the realization of the organizational objectives. This progressive empowerment creates a sense of ownership and addresses innovation faster.

### **5.3.4 Take a Strategy and Auditable approach to Stakeholder Engagement**

Companies ought to make stakeholder engagement no longer an ad-hoc task but a disciplined strategic process. This entails an organized mapping of material stakeholder groups, performing consistent materiality tests in a bid to discover the changing expect-

tations, and incorporating them to the strategic risk management and opportunity development procedures. We suggest Structuring feedback loops: Creating annual stakeholder panels and conducting sustainability audits of suppliers and publicly reporting on how this interaction has affected corporate strategy and company practices.

### **5.3.5 Re-Write the Story on Sustainability Investments**

Rather than explaining sustainability initiatives as costs and compliance liabilities, senior leaders need to engage in proactive communication of sustainability initiatives as strategic investments in resilience and value creation over the long term. The finance and the communications department should work together to come up with strong business cases that would measure the value of intangible assets that have been developed through the sustainability initiatives including increased brand equity, decreased operational risk, and increased employee recruitment and retention. This re-packaging is critical in achieving long-term investment and organizational buy-in.

## **5.4 Suggestions for Further Research**

Although the current study contributes detailed information on the relationship between sustainable strategic leadership and organizational objectives, it also leaves a number of gaps in the future research of scholars.

### **5.4.1 Longitudinal and Quantitative Research**

This study was a cross-sectional and qualitative study. Longitudinal designs are also recommended in future research to be able to track the cause-and-effect relationships of sustainable leadership practices on the financial performance, rate of innovation, and employee retention of an organization throughout a span of 5 to 10 years. Quantitative studies conducted on a large scale, where surveys are used to measure leadership practices and compare them with hard performance data over a broader sample of different industries would prove invaluable in terms of generalizing these results and determining statistical significance.

#### **5.4.2 Cross-Cultural and Cross-Industrial Comparative Research**

The results of this study are rich, but context-specific. An interesting field of further investigation is a comparative study of the effects of sustainable leadership depending on different national cultures and institutional settings in which it is exercised. Equally, a comparison between those drivers and barriers to SSL in service-based and manufacturing industries, or in profit and non-profit making organizations would give a more nuanced view of the contextual dependencies of the former.

#### **5.4.3 Research on the Digital Enablers of Sustainable Leadership**

The role of digital technologies in enabling sustainable leadership has not been investigated properly. The next generation of studies may explore how technologies such as AI and big data analytics can enable leaders to make decisions that are more sustainable, monitor ESG indicators in real-time, increase transparency in the stakeholders, and deal with complex supply chains. The analysis of digital transformation interconnection with sustainable leadership is one of the most essential areas of study.

#### **5.4.4 Investigating the Micro-foundations of SSL Impact**

This research paper was concerned with organization-level results. The psychological mechanisms of the individual and the team have to be examined more thoroughly. Studies may examine the effects of sustainable leadership on employee psychological safety, intrinsic motivation, pro-environmental behavior, and ethical decision-making on the micro-level, which would give a more comprehensive picture of the cascade of leadership impacts within the organization.

#### **5.4.5 Role of Governance and Boards in SSL**

The role played by the structure of corporate governance and the board of directors in promoting sustainable strategic leadership or vice versa is an important concern. Further

research might investigate the relationship between board structure, experience in sustainability, and director incentive systems and their effect on executive implementation and effectiveness of the principles of the Lucas Stanley Sustainability.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview Data Collection from Interview

Research Question: How can strategic leadership and organizational goals achievement be achieved sustainably?

#### Part A: Definitions and Personal understanding of the concept of SSL

(Wants to know what the participant thinks and mentally frames about the topic of SSL)

1. In your own words, what are the meanings of: sustainable leadership or sustainable strategic leadership?
2. What is sustainability to you as well as your organization?
3. Which particular leader (in or out of this organization) can you identify that you see as a role model of sustainable leadership? What are some of the behaviors or qualities of them?

#### Part B: SSL Implementation in Strategy and Practices

(Seeks to find out the routinized, everyday actions and organizational work that leaders engage in)

4. What is the official policy in your organization that incorporates sustainability in your strategic planning?
5. What is an example of a major decision in which sustainability (environmental, social, long-term) considerations were a major factor, perhaps to the point of them taking precedence over short-term financial considerations?
6. Are there any formal mechanisms or arrangements in place here to facilitate sustainability? (e.g. special committees, innovation funds, special KPIs in performance reviews).
7. What resources (budget, personnel, time) are being used to help sustainability initiatives? Is this not the same as other projects are funded?

**Part C: The competencies related to leadership and communication**

(Efforts to understand symbolic action, communication techniques and attention-making mechanisms)

8. Other than the formal reports, how do the leaders of this organization communicate the significance of sustainability goals to the employees and other stakeholders?
9. Is there a memorable symbolic act or narrative of a leader that made a significant impact by articulating how the organization believes in its sustainability?
10. What is the response of leaders to the scenario when a sustainable objective and a short-term financial objective are at a clear conflict?
11. What, in your opinion, is the best manner in which leaders in this area focus organizational focus on long-term, sustainable results?

**Part D: Procedural Environment and Workforce Diversity**

(Intends to explore the institutional work in connection with the creation of relationships and the organization of organizational culture)

12. What does the organization do concerning sustainability concerns with the external stakeholders (e.g., suppliers, local communities, regulators)? What is the part of the leadership in this?
13. What is the method of employee empowerment or encouragement to engage in sustainability goals? Can you give an example?
14. What is the organizational culture as far as sustainability is concerned? How much do you believe this is one of the products of a conscious leadership?
15. How are there processes to retain the knowledge and sustainability efforts are maintained even when there is a change of leadership or staff?

**Part E: Perceived Results and Change of Objectives**

(Needs to relate the practices of the SSL to the fulfilment of the organizational objectives)

16. According to your opinion, what have been the greatest positive results of the attention to sustainable leadership by your organization?
17. Has this emphasis ever come to problems or may be perceived as negative effects? If so, how were they managed?
18. How do you think sustainable leadership has assisted the organization in meeting its key performance objectives (ex: in terms of innovation, brand name, customer satisfaction, financial stability, employee retention)?
19. What has this strategy rendered the organization stronger or more future proof?

**Part F: Last Thoughts**

20. Do you believe there is anything more that is significant to the role and ability of sustainable leadership in this organization that we have not covered?
21. Are there any questions you have of me?