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Chapter

# The Nature of Sustainable Leadership: Pitfalls, Insights and New Model

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## Abstract

This review aims to identify pitfalls and insights into the nature of sustainable leadership frameworks and propose a new framework for organisational longevity and the sustenance of society and the environment. A background literature review was conducted to purposively select seminal and influential frameworks of sustainable leadership. Pitfalls and insights in these frameworks were delineated and developed into broader categories using open coding and constant comparison. The findings reveal that the pitfalls of sustainable leadership at the individual level include a lack of accurate sustainability self-awareness, failure to realise the diversity of strategic thinking competencies and a shaky foundation of sustainability literacy. In contrast, ethical competence and system literacy constitute vital insights. At the organisational level, it is revealed that lack of sustainability human resources, absence of a sustainable organisational culture model and lack of clarity on the value of social capital are pitfalls of sustainable leadership. Organisational-level insights in sustainable leadership hinge on stakeholder centricity, the complexity of driving sustainability innovation and managing the complexity of internal and external interdependencies. A new integrative model of sustainable leadership is proposed with various dimensions for leaders to significantly propagate and model sustainable leadership in the organisation.

**Keywords:** sustainable leadership, systems leadership, sustainability

## 1. Introduction

Leadership is capable of integrating sustainability into every activity to balance both the pressure of short-term goals and priorities along with long-term goals and is needed for the sustainable future of all stakeholders, the planet and profit (Bocken and Short [1]). As the world faces more significant environmental, economic and social challenges, sustainable leadership is a top organisational and societal priority. In the corporate context, there is a positive trend of having new sustainable leadership roles, such as chief sustainability officer. While this is laudable, there is still a need for all leaders and board members to build their sustainability literacy and competencies. Building capacity for sustainable leadership among leaders at all levels is a critical matter, especially since there is a slow pace and limited scale of the actual practice

of sustainable leadership in many organisations and levels of society. This pace is worrisome when one thinks of the wicked social and environmental problems (e.g. floods and excessive heat) triggered by the effects of unsustainable business models, which are increasing in frequency, intensity and complexity. It is imperative that sustainable leadership practices gain scale and reach a tipping point in the organisation and society as quickly as possible to deal with unsustainable business models and beliefs. The challenge of scaling up sustainable leadership practice reminds us of Yue et al. [2], who assert that limited research and literature examine how sustainability or sustainable leadership models influence employees' 'sustainability behaviour' in several sectors. For example, Tsai and Lu [3] observe that only a few studies have explored the impact of leadership on port sustainability performance.

Sustainable leadership is essential to erode the power of the old axiom that the 'business of business is business' [4]. Sustainable leadership beliefs and practices are vital for balancing the triple bottom line, generally known as the three P's—planet, profit and people to pursue sustainability and organisational longevity [5]. Frank Horwitz, who supports sustainable leadership, asserts that the only business of business is sustainable businesses [6]. In this regard, leadership is implored to make decisions with an eye to the complete picture and move away from exclusively focusing on the short-term and business-as-usual approach.

The notions of leadership effectiveness, which focus exclusively on the organisation's values and inward-focused metrics rather than broader society, are inadequate to cater for sustainable leadership. The traditional thinking of an organisation as a machine with metaphors of a leader as driver, mechanic or engineer is parochial and exclusionary to measure the effectiveness of sustainable leadership as this leaves out the broader society and the balancing of outcomes in the triple bottom line. As sustainable leadership is unique, calls for broader and different conceptualisation and metrics to measure the 'triple bottom line of organisational performance in terms of social, environmental and economic outcomes are necessary [7]. Therefore, it is compelling for scholars of leadership to develop new conceptions, theories and practices of sustainable leadership more aligned to the integrative, systemic, holistic and long-term pursuit of sustainable organisation and interconnected society in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous context.

The review aimed to identify pitfalls and insights into the nature of sustainable leadership frameworks and proposes a new framework for organisational longevity and the sustenance of society and the environment. This review is valuable because it provides a theoretical framework for sustainable leadership and pragmatic guidance for leadership in terms of the critical components that require attention to practice and model effective sustainable leadership in an organisation.

The chapter starts by unravelling the ontology of sustainability and the concept of sustainable leadership. Subsequently, there is a discussion on the multi-level and system perspectives of sustainable leadership before the analysis and presentation of pitfalls and insights delineated from the review of the selected frameworks of sustainable leadership. Lastly, the chapter presents an integrative model of sustainable leadership and the future direction for research and practice.

## **2. The ontology of sustainability and concept of sustainable leadership**

The concept of sustainable leadership is complex as it combines two key aspects: Sustainability and leadership. First, it is crucial to delve into the ontology of

sustainability in terms of its complexity and multi-dimensional nature before focusing on the concept of sustainable leadership.

## 2.1 Ontology of sustainability

According to Layman, sustainability refers to the capacity and thresholds to maintain and protect a particular entity, process or outcome at a certain level over some time [8]. In more technical and specific parlance, sustainability is conceived in terms of the triple bottom line, namely the social, economic and environmental [5]. First, the environmental aspect of sustainability includes the reduction of people's negative impacts on the environment and the protection of nature and ecosystems [3]. Human beings must act responsibly and sensitively to use all resources as they have a limit. Second, the social dimension refers to sustainability's human, institutional, cultural and societal aspects. Lastly, the economic dimension relates to the link between economic activities, growth and effects. Sustainability in business dwells on reducing or avoiding unsustainable business models with adverse effects on the environment and society [1]. Sustainability's environmental, economic and social dimensions are interdependent and interconnected and interact in non-linear ways. A shift in one can, in turn, cause a series of knock-on effects in the others. This interconnection brings to the fore the dynamic and temporal aspects of sustainability, where the cause and effect are subtle, and the results of interventions are not immediately apparent. Sustainability entails a conscious effort to create shared value in the mutual balance of all interests. Shared value reflects a win-win scenario that differs from the concept of 'trade-offs' as a 'win/lose' scenario.

The Brundtland report for the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) [9] defines sustainability as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This definition has aspects of dynamic and temporal complexity. At its core, sustainability implies the continued flourishing of human societies in a constantly changing world competing for social, economic and environmental conditions. Complexity arises from 'inter-relationship, inter-action and inter-connectivity of elements within a system' among elements that make up the system (micro-level) and different systems (macro-level) [10]. Sustainability is a complex process of continuous adaptation to change. The processual perspective opposes the view of sustainability as an outcome or a specific end state, best captured by static outcome indicators [11].

Path dependencies help deal with sustainability problems but may stifle an organisation or society from reflexively adapting to existing change or allowing radically new conditions to be possible. Complexity may also arise from counterintuitiveness, which occurs when interactions intended to produce the desired outcome generate opposite results [9].

The ontological view of sustainability depicts multiple dimensions. Four dimensions of sustainability decipherable in Refs. [1, 9, 12] are (1) environmental-based sustainability, (2) corporate sustainability, (3) business-related sustainability and (4) sustainability in education. Proactive and environmentally friendly behaviours that people perform in the natural environment or that try to reduce the negative impact of their activities on the natural environment are termed pro-environmental behaviours [12]. Employees can choose whether or not to implement pro-environmental behaviours in the workplace (e.g. actively recycling paper and saving water and

electricity). In pursuit of sustainability, short- and long-term objectives are complementary rather than incompatible.

## 2.2 The concept of sustainable leadership

Leadership and sustainable leadership are concepts that lack definitional consensus. However, De Vries [13] has highlighted that the concept of lead, leader and leadership is traceable to the word *laed* in the Anglo-Saxon etymology. The word *laed* means a path or road. A leader is a pathfinder who shows fellow travellers the way by walking ahead, creating the desired future state and inspiring people to collaborate to make it happen. The leader responds to whatever changes and challenges arise along the way. Bulmer et al. [14] agree that leadership enables the creation of a vision, leads to the setting up of a high-performance team, keeps the team motivated, maintains a good rapport and ensures that team members are aware of the information needed, helps maintain the satisfaction of followers and uses the social influence of followers to achieve shared goals.

Hargreaves and Fink [15] construe sustainable leadership as a shared responsibility, which does not excessively exhaust resources but also maintains and avoids damaging the environment. An overview of extant definitions of sustainable leadership helps concisely illustrate the vital conceptual insights. **Table 1** below provides an overview of randomly selected definitions from literature to illuminate some of the critical themes and nature of sustainable leadership.

The table above illustrates that sustainable leadership integrates intra and interpersonal processes. It is also about the impetus to balance economic, social and environmental needs while interconnecting current and future sustainable performance [16]. A synthesis of conceptual definitions by Ref. [23] surmises nine aspects of what sustainable leadership entails:

1. Vision of the long term;
2. Emphasis on leadership rather than a unitary leader;
3. Broader goals that link organisations to society;
4. Ethical behaviour;
5. Social responsibilities of leaders and organisations;
6. Innovation capacity;
7. Systemic change;
8. Stakeholder engagement and
9. Capacity building of stakeholders.

Author	Definitions of sustainable leadership	Theme
McCann and Holt [16]	Sustainable leadership is concerned with creating current and future profits for an organisation while improving the lives of all concerned.	Integration of current and long-term financial perspective; stakeholder centricity
Avery and Bergsteiner [17]	Sustainable leadership comprises those behaviours and practices that create lasting value for all stakeholders, such as society, the environment and future generations (p. 7). ‘Sustainable leadership emerges from the interplay of many factors... there is no one ‘right’ way within the overall sustainable leadership paradigm’ (p. 5).	Sustainable leadership behaviours and practices; lasting shared value
Hargreaves [18]	Sustainable leadership is preserving and developing everything that spreads and continues deeply, without being damaged, and positively influencing others today and in the future.	Depth and breadth of sustainable leadership; positive integrative influence
Casserley and Critchley [19]	‘Performance derives from the integration of three core processes: Reflection on the action; psychological intelligence and physiological well-being... it is the integration of these three core processes, followed by their engagement with the culture of the organisation, which constitutes effective leadership development, generates sustainable leaders and is more likely to create sustainable organisations’ (p. 290).	Integration of components intra and inter-processes for personal sustainability
Davies [20]	‘Sustainable leadership can be considered to be made up of the key factors that underpin the longer-term development of the school. It builds a leadership culture based on moral purpose, which provides success that is accessible to all’ (p. 11).	Long-term perspective; leadership development culture and moral purpose; stakeholder centricity
Lambert [21]	‘If sustainable leadership is to have any measurable impact on the organisation, it needs commitment from all levels of the organisation to create a culture in which leadership skills can be developed’ (p. 145).	Holistic organisational commitment for sustainable performance; culture of leadership development
Iqbal, Hazlina Ahmad and Li [22]	Sustainable leadership practices emphasise sustained learning; long-lasting success; ethical, social, and responsible behaviour; development of resources, environmental diversity, efficient stakeholder management and amicable relationship with employees.	Variety of sustainable leadership practices;
Stephanie [5]	Sustainable leadership is all about adopting a responsible approach to the way that we lead, stopping to think about the wider impact of our actions on society and the environment.	Responsible, leadership; systems thinking.
Nisha et al. [23]	Sustainable leadership is holistic- and all-encompassing way to deal with driving an association to adjust individuals, benefits and the planet and advance the life span of the firm through evidence-based administration practices.	Holistic and organisational long-term perspective

*Source: Own.*

**Table 1.**  
*Selected definitions of sustainable leadership.*

Kantabutra and Avery [24] agree that ethical behaviour, social and environmental responsibility, innovation and long-term perspective are among the six core sustainable leadership practices. However, Kantabutra and Avery [24] add organisational culture and staff development as critical aspects of sustainable leadership. Lastly, sustainable leadership is not role-based but action-based, where leadership is a complex social process and practices amongst a group rather than the action of an individual. Sustainable leaders pursue conscious actions, individually or collectively, to achieve outcomes that nurture, support and sustain economic, environmental and social systems integratively. With the conceptual clarity of sustainable leadership in mind, it is pivotal to understand how sustainability, on the one hand, and the ontology of leadership, on the other, undermine or complement each other.

### 3. Integration of sustainability and ontology of leadership

Drath et al. [25] decipher that mainstream literature on leadership depicts two different ontologies, the tripod and direction, alignment and commitment (DAC), which are insightful in the integration of sustainability into leadership.

#### 3.1 Tripod ontology of leadership and sustainability

Drath et al. [25] assert that a tripod ontology of leadership is about the social interactions between leaders, followers and shared goals. To elaborate on this tripod ontology of leadership, Drath et al. [25] summarise that:

*'In its simplest form, [leadership] is a tripod—leader or leaders, followers and a common goal they want to achieve' [26]. This is not a definition of leadership but something much more fundamental: It is an expression of commitment to the entities (leaders, followers and common goals) essential and indispensable to leadership and about which any theory of leadership must, therefore, speak.*

The tripod ontology of leadership is insightful to any scholar trying to situate the phenomenon of leadership in the context of sustainability. Generally, leadership is social influence—not a mere personality trait. The micro-view of leadership focuses exclusively on the individual characteristics of a leader.

The tripod ontology may help understand hierarchical, individual and micro-level aspects of the influence and relationship in the leader-follower interactions. The direct, dyadic interactions of leader-follower are important as sustainability starts with an individual leader mobilising other people. Uhl-Bien et al. [27] are explicit that a full understanding of leadership requires an examination of the contribution of followers and followership to the leadership process. Thus, the tripod is not about leader-centric views but rather a leadership process, which recognises the importance of follower roles, following behaviours, and followership styles.

However, the mainstream literature on leadership has some assumptions, which can potentially limit sustainable leadership. Heroic leadership uphold quality that inheres in an individual and attributes responsibility for outcomes disproportionately to an individual. This notion of heroic leadership obscures the importance of other situational and contextual factors (e.g. nature of the interpersonal relationship with followers and resources) that shape leadership outcomes [28].

The heroic view of leadership is criticised for minimal efforts toward the bigger society's common good as it often focuses on the self-interests of the hero [28]. Traditional leadership theory supports the salience of special individuals or heroes who can be identified as leaders by role or act. The heroic-leadership approach can potentially undermine the collective dimension of sustainable leadership if it disempowers followership (e.g. followers' destructive practices of treating the leader as an idol, inducing their learned helplessness and passivity). Hargreaves and Fink [29] argue that sustainability is greater than any individual within an organisation, requiring that organisations invest time to develop a network of leaders at all levels.

The tripod ontology of leadership pays much attention to the activities to influence followers towards a common goal rather than the outcomes of leadership in the long term. For example, sustainable leadership premised on the tripod may have a balanced triple bottom line as a common goal. However, the tripod ontology emphasises micro, dyadic and hierarchical influence and relationships that is narrow to support emergent leadership theories such as shared/distributed leadership and sustainable leadership. Distributed and shared leadership theories rely on more than hierarchical influence as there is also the need for lateral influence, exchange and interaction on multiple levels and shared understanding of various stakeholders [30].

Suriyankietkaew and Avery [31] argue that sustainable leadership needs to be researched not from the micro perspective, which focuses on the dyadic relationship, but rather from a macro-level leadership perspective. The macro perspective of leadership focuses on the social process that contains complex relationships and the organisation's strategic and overall leadership system within an organisation and its outcomes. While the tripod uncovers the essence of leadership in general, it is inadequate to truly embrace sustainable leadership, which requires both macro-perspective and multi-level interrelationships and emphasises broader leadership outcomes in the triple bottom line. The following section depicts how sustainable leadership is more aligned with a different ontology of leadership called DAC.

### **3.2 Direction, alignment and commitment (DAC) ontology and the honey bee approach**

Drath et al. [25] proposed leadership's direction, alignment and commitment (DAC) ontology. This ontology underscores that individual leaders' and collective leadership beliefs integrate into leadership practices and shape the longer-term outcomes of leadership. Individual and collective beliefs are crucial to producing DAC of people, activities and their commitment to long-term leadership outcomes. DAC is achieved by leadership in an organisation based on shared resources and a web of common, mutually acknowledged and understood beliefs, which create and reshape leadership practice. Leadership practices in the DAC ontology are collective enactments with intended outcomes. These practices reflect patterns in the behaviour of a collective aimed at producing DAC (e.g. pattern of conversation and routines that transcend individual behaviour). Without alignment with the contextual and organisational situation, leadership practices limit achieving long-term goals.

In the DAC ontology, leadership shapes direction, which refers to the reasonable level of understanding and agreement regarding the collective's shared work's aims, mission, and goals. Direction for sustainable leadership relates to sustainability thresholds, emerging and purposeful consciousness among people who choose to live their lives and lead organisations in ways that account for their footprint on the earth, society and the health of a global economy.

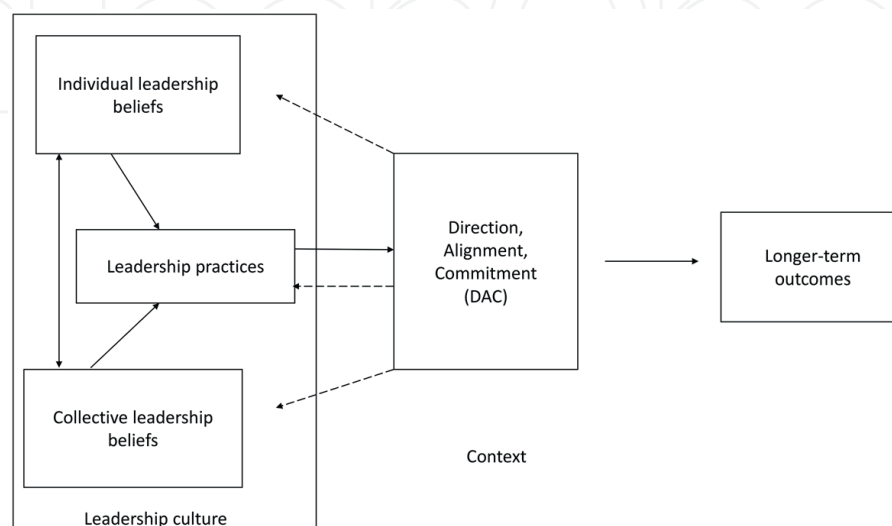


DAC ontology also underscores that leadership seeks to achieve alignment. Concisely, alignment hinges on the organisation and coordination of knowledge and work so that there is coherence with the work of other individuals and groups. Lastly, commitment as part of DAC ontology is about the willingness of individuals to subsume their efforts and benefits within a collective effort and benefits. Commitment is evident in various ways, which include undivided loyalty or extra effort and organisational citizenship behaviours. **Figure 1** depicts the elements of the DAC ontology, interrelationship and interactions of leadership beliefs at the individual and collective levels, and leadership practices influencing the DAC and long-term outcomes of leadership.

The production of DAC is inextricably bound to webs of beliefs and practices in the leadership context and culture. While changing the thoughts and behaviours of people in positions of authority are necessary for changing the leadership culture, it is insufficient to bring about sustainable changes without changing the beliefs and behaviours of everyone who thinks and acts in ways that sustain the culture [25]. Producing DAC is not just a one-off exercise but requires reproducing and re-creating DAC as the context changes [25]. Having elaborated on the DAC, the following section unravels the honey bee and locust philosophies. It illuminates the integration of the sustainability lens with the different ontologies of leadership to achieve sustainability vision and outcome.

### 3.2.1 Honeybee, locust and DAC

Avery and Bergsteiner [32] proposed the first framework of sustainable leadership based on the ‘honey bee philosophy’ that facilitates outcomes within and beyond the triple bottom line. The honeybee philosophy asserts that an organisation can be sustainable only if its operating context is sustainable and the basic needs of all involved are met [33]. Honeybee leadership is about stakeholder orientation, long-term focus and delivery of outcomes more responsibly [33]. Honeybee’s philosophy informs leaders to pursue three key issues: Care for and develop people in an organisation, protect the planet, care for the local communities in which they operate and protect the organisational image and brand through ethical behaviour.



**Figure 1**  
DAC ontology. Source: Drath, McCauley, Paulus and Velsor [25].

The opposite of the honey bee philosophy is called the locust approach to business. The locust approach upholds the belief that the only goal of a business is to generate profit and growth for its shareholders [33]. In short, the locust approach pronounces the belief of shareholders first and profits at all costs in leading an organisation. Locust leadership calls for one to be tough and ruthless and do whatever is necessary to perform well in the short term [33]. The core idea is that an individual or organisation gains an advantage only by making others suffer. At the centre, locust philosophy is the concept of a zero-sum game [33]. Honeybee's philosophy and behaviours of stakeholder centricity and the locust behaviours of shareholder primacy depict two different leadership philosophies. Avery and Bergsteiner [32] developed the first comprehensive framework of sustainable leadership based on the honey bee philosophy, which shows a shift from the shareholder view of organisations to a consideration of stakeholders with the integration of short-term goals in support of long-term objectives as a primary concern. There are two commonalities between the DAC ontology of leadership and the framework of sustainable leadership proposed by Ref. [33]. Thus, they both focus on leadership outcomes and recognise context's significant role in shaping leadership. Sustainable leadership align pro-environmental beliefs and behaviours and emerging outcomes, such as environmental performance and sustainability performance, which are not part of the conventional ontology of leadership.

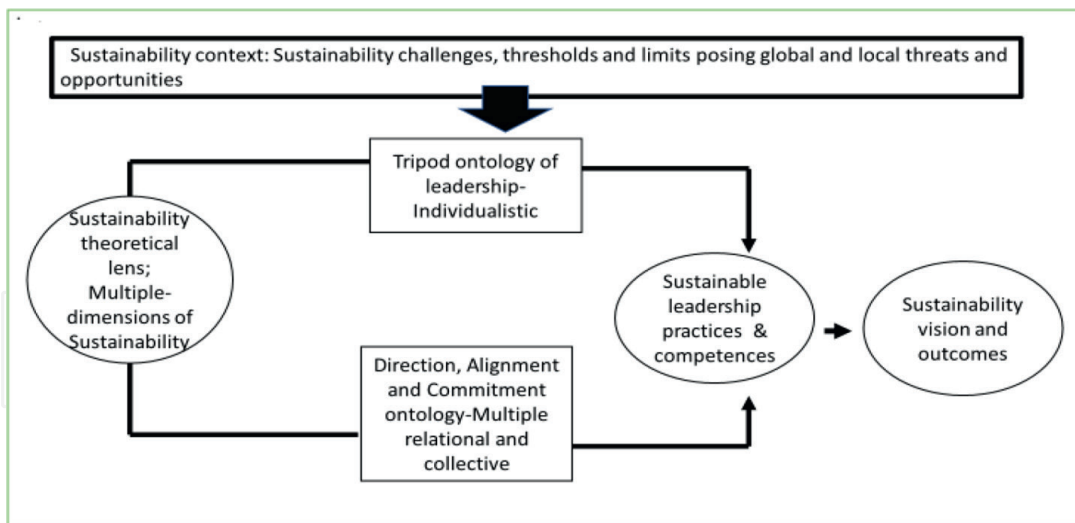
Critical theorists such as Bendell et al. [28] emphasise the need to differentiate sustainable leadership from traditional leadership. The effort by scholars to draw uncritically from mainstream leadership approaches to define sustainability often results in exceptionalism (e.g. transformational leadership 'for' sustainability). Clarity of frame-sustaining or frame-breaking change in leadership theory is vital to understand the magnitude and nuances of integrating sustainability into leadership. Sustainability 'bolted on' to a pre-existing leadership framework or theory is seen as shallow, an attachment and not integral to leadership. Frame-sustaining change entails using existing leadership theories and paradigms to adapt and work more efficiently on what leadership is already doing. Frame-sustaining behaviour by leadership includes a narrow focus on one aspect while failing to address the bigger issues that institutionalise unsustainability.

On the other hand, sustainability 'built-in' leadership resonates with frame-breaking change. The theoretical sustainability lens deeply and widely permeates and reconfigures the pre-existing tripod and DAC ontologies of leadership to create new and more effective leadership given sustainability thresholds, limits and challenges. **Figure 2** depicts a baseline model of sustainable leadership driven by a sustainability lens to enable deep, wide and lasting integration of sustainability into leadership.

To be effective, sustainable leadership entails frame-breaking change. This change emphasises deep and lasting shifts in direction, procedures and culture to enable organisations to work more differently, effectively and sustainably. Notably, integrating the sustainability lens with ontologies of leadership is necessary to understand sustainable leadership. The following section underscores the need to shift from conceptions of leadership in a closed system to leadership in an open and connected context to enhance our understanding of sustainable leadership.

### 3.3 Systems view of sustainable leadership

Sustainable leaders must be system thinkers able to see the big picture while also paying attention to details, relationships between parts of a system, and how these parts combine to create the emergent properties of a whole. The systems lens



**Figure 2.**  
Baseline model of sustainable leadership. Source: Own.

of sustainable leadership relies on two key issues, namely the interconnectivity at multiple levels of leadership and sustainable leadership in an open system.

### 3.3.1 Multiple levels of leadership and threat of disconnection

Organisation theorists assert that there are three levels in the leadership system of any organisation. According to the seminal work of Katz [34], these three levels or categories of leadership are the tactical, operational and strategic levels nested or embedded within one another. Tactical leadership focuses on the ‘here and now’, with short-term decisions and risk management for immediate gains [35]. Operational leaders guide teams in analysing and comprehending the organisation’s strategic and tactical realities. These leaders design the infrastructure and framework (e.g. operational processes, structures and systems) that enable employees and enhance systems to work tactically toward the organisation’s strategy. Lastly, there are strategic leaders at the top of the organisation who constitute the upper echelon. Samimi, Cortes, Anderson and Herrmann [36] are cogent that strategic leaders provide long-term direction (e.g. vision, mission and strategy), motivate and influence employees, create and change organisational culture and drive and align strategy during execution. Strategic leaders form the top management team (TMT) of the organisation and perform symbolic and ceremonial roles (e.g. attending or representing the organisation at functions) and relational work (e.g. building relationships and trust across sectors and organisations, networking with key external stakeholders) [37]. While all three levels of leadership are essential to embedding sustainability in an organisation, members of the TMT are critical as all the other members take cues from them. The upper echelon theory, the theoretical root and seminal work by Hambrick and Mason [38] on strategic leadership, underscores that ‘organisational outcomes – both strategies and effectiveness – are viewed as reflections of powerful actors’ values and cognitive bases in the organisation’. Thus, strategic leadership theories are about the leadership ‘of’ organisations and their changing aims and capabilities [37].

A multi-level phenomenon of sustainable leadership implies a commitment to unravel processes embedded in contexts, providing explanations for changes traced to higher and lower levels of the system. Sustainable leadership is not restricted to one

person or level within the organisation. The dominant assumptions that sustainable leadership is for those in the upper echelon of the environmental specialists alone to express are both unhelpful and yet widely promoted by current work on leadership. Assumptions like these have negative implications for developing a decentralised or distributed leadership network at all levels.

Mechanical and psychological employee empowerment is helpful for leaders to avoid vertical and horizontal disconnections between actors, levels and sectors and the short-term from long-term aspects of organisational sustainability. Extrinsic, structural and top-down cascading of power to lower levels constitute mechanical empowerment. In contrast, psychological empowerment is intrinsic and focuses on the intrapersonal aspects of employees. Psychological empowerment dwells on how employees think of their work, gain experience, believe in their job, and impact their organisation [39].

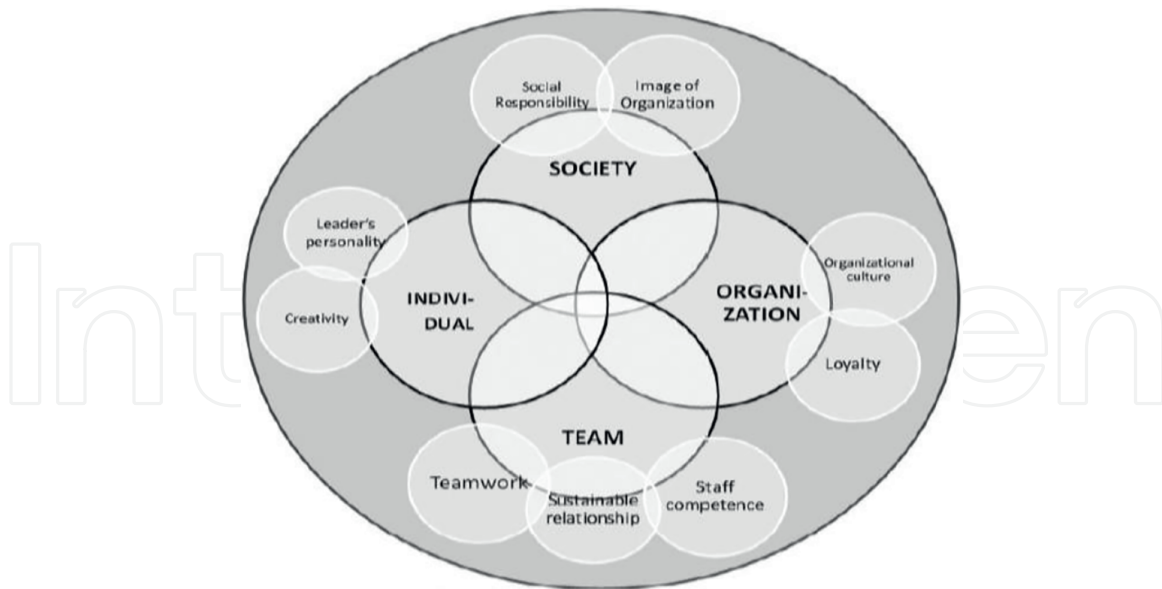
### *3.3.2 Components and interrelationship of sustainable leadership in an open system*

Sustainable leadership is exercised in an open organisational and social system. A 'system' is created when the level of connectivity between actors fosters interdependence on one other [23]. Open social systems have permeable boundaries that allow information and resources to flow in and out, interdependent subsystems and processes of communication, feedback, and management linking the subsystems. Conversely, the closed system approach allows leaders and organisational theorists to analyse problems by examining the hard elements (e.g. strategy, structure and systems) and soft elements (e.g. shared values, skills, staff and styles) of the organisational architecture with little consideration of the external environment.

Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew [7] are explicit that while research on organisational leadership has made impressive progress over the two past decades, the literature continues to emphasise and study leadership effectiveness within 'closed systems'. In this case, 'effective leadership' is most frequently defined and measured in terms of effects on internal organisational measures (e.g. staff job satisfaction, commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour, task performance). It has been less common for scholars to conceptualise the effects of organisational leadership in terms of leader and organisational impact on the broader society. This limitation of leadership research comes to the fore when we examine 'sustainability' in organisations and society. The exercising of sustainable leadership needs to start from the individual level- from ourselves and subsequently involve the complexity arising from interactions and interrelationships between numerous elements of team, organisation and society, as shown in **Figure 3**.

The model of sustainable leadership by [40] acknowledges emergent inter-organisational and cross-sector collaborations across the elements in different subsystems. Individuals improve their sustainability by developing creativity and personality before they can lead others in the organisation and society. Qualified and loyal staff, sustainable relationships between employees and teamwork are the basis of organisational sustainability. Organisational culture includes others to limit the negative impact of organisational activities on people, the planet and profit [39]. Social responsibility is oriented towards sustainability in an already broader context and the perception of a sustainable organisation. Social responsibility implements the ideas of sustainability as the basis for a better organisational image.

More importantly, the model of sustainable leadership [40] highlights the departure from leaders' traditional top-down, hierarchical and direct social influence to



**Figure 3.**  
*The model of the factors of sustainable leadership. Source: Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40].*

systems leadership. Systems leadership catalyse, enable and empower collective action among networks of plural leaders and diverse actors to achieve common sustainability goals through widespread action and innovation. With clarity on the concept of sustainable leadership, the following section focuses on the selection of the different frameworks of sustainable leadership analysed in this review.

#### **4. Analysis of frameworks of sustainable leadership: insights and pitfalls**

First, it is essential to clarify that this review involved six frameworks of sustainable leaders. Five frameworks and models of sustainable leadership were selected for this review because many scholars recognise them as seminal works and influential frameworks in the scholarship of sustainable leadership [41]. As seminal works are salient to trace the initial idea of great importance or influence on a particular matter, they also enrich conceptual clarity by revealing conceptual commonalities, gaps and insights. The five seminal frameworks selected for this review are by Casserley and Critchley [19], Avery and Bergsteiner [17], Hargreaves and Fink [29], Davies [20], and Lambert [21]. The sixth model by Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] was selected for analysis primarily because it presents a unique view and interconnected nature of sustainable leadership, which explicitly depict how an individual, organisation and society intersect when it comes to sustainability.

Second, it is crucial to highlight that frameworks in Refs. [17, 20, 21, 29] depict an organisational view of sustainable leadership predominantly while only [19] focused on an individual perspective. Self-awareness, psychological and physiological health and engagement with the organisational culture are critical for individual-level sustainability. Equally notable is how Gerard, McMillan and D'Annunzio-Green [41] have identified two broad themes of sustainable leadership: People and organisational processes. Within the people dimension, sustainable leadership entails inclusive learning and development opportunities for employees throughout the organisation and an ideology of building capacity and resourcefulness by all employees. Aligning the various components in the organisational architecture with long-term goals and

strategies and ethical behaviour form part of critical organisational processes. Social responsibility advocates embed sustainability practices throughout society. However, there is no exact detail on how far an organisation will be accountable to wider stakeholders. **Table 2** compares the perspective, strategic orientation and fundamental aspects of the five seminal frameworks of sustainable leadership.

Author(s) discussing sustainable leadership	[19]	[17]	[29]	[20]	[21]
<b>Perspective</b>	Individual perspective—focus is on developing sustainable leaders	<i>Organisational perspective—adopt a holistic view and believe it is the way in which an organisation is led that leads to sustainability</i>	<i>Organisational perspective—emphasises that sustainability should be viewed as a meal, not a menu</i>	<i>Organisational perspective—believes that sustainable leadership should be embedded throughout the organisations</i>	<i>Organisational Perspective—predominantly considers the development of sustainable leadership</i>
<b>Strategic Orientation</b>	Developing individual leaders' capacity for sustainability first. <i>Integration of three individual core processes: reflection on the action; psychological intelligence and physiological well-being followed by engagement with the organisational culture (2010:290).</i>	<i>Lead the entire organisation sustainably and develop diversity and capacity to endure over time. Sustainable leadership emerges from the interplay of many factors within the overall sustainable leadership paradigm (2011:7).</i>	<i>The different and more challenging demands of sustainability vision and values invoke leadership for 'learning, leadership by learning and leadership as learning' (2011:19).</i>	<i>Sustainable leadership is constitutive of critical factors for longer-term development, and culture based on moral purpose, which provides success that is accessible to all" (p.11).</i>	<i>Sustainable leadership hinges on the measurable impact on the organisation arising from the commitment from all levels and culture leadership skills development (p.145).</i>
<b>Fundamental aspects of sustainable leadership</b>	Sustainable leaders are self-aware and manage their sustainability first by sustaining personal psychological and physiological health. Leaders are potent agents who define aspects of the organisational culture and conditions they feel committed.	<i>The three tenets of the honeybee philosophy are to care for and develop people in an organisation, protect the planet, care for the local communities and protect the organisation through ethical behaviour. Sustainable leadership involves a four-layered pyramid and unity of elements at all levels constitute 'honeybee' practices in the sustainable leadership system.</i>	<i>A seven-principle model for sustainable leadership with three dimensions: Depth (matters), breadth (spread) and length (last) and four further principles of sustainability. There is an interconnectedness of all seven principles and the necessity of treating them like a meal, not a menu.</i>	<i>Sustainable leadership involves making strategic decisions about what priorities and activities are to be kept and pursued and which ones should be abandoned in pursuit of longer-term survival, building capacity and leadership culture based on moral purpose and deep learning short-term successes.</i>	<i>Six components of sustainable leadership form a tool for developing organisational capacity and leadership.</i>

Author(s) discussing sustainable leadership	[19]	[17]	[29]	[20]	[21]
<b>Framework presented surrounding sustainable leadership</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reflection on Action (learning through doing)</li> <li>2. Psychological Intelligence (having a clear sense of personal purpose and an awareness of personal assumptions and motivations)</li> <li>3. Physiological Well-being (effective management of stress and sufficient self-care)</li> <li>4. Engagement of core processes with the culture of the organisation</li> </ol>	<p><b>Foundation Practices</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Developing people;</li> <li>2. Labour relations;</li> <li>3. Retaining staff;</li> <li>4. Succession planning;</li> <li>5. Valuing staff;</li> <li>6. CEO and top team;</li> <li>7. Ethical Behaviour;</li> <li>8. Long- or short-term perspective;</li> <li>9. Organisational Change;</li> <li>10. Financial markets orientation;</li> <li>11. Responsibility for the environment;</li> <li>12. Social Responsibility (CSR);</li> <li>13. Stakeholder consideration;</li> <li>14. Vision's role in the business</li> </ol> <p><b>higher level practices;</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decision making;</li> <li>2. Self-Management;</li> <li>3. Team Orientation;</li> <li>4. Culture;</li> <li>5. Knowledge-sharing and retention and</li> <li>6. Trust</li> </ol> <p><b>Key Performance Drivers</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Innovation;</li> <li>2. Staff engagement and</li> <li>3. Quality</li> </ol> <p><b>Performance outcome</b> Brand and reputation; customer satisfaction; financial performance; long-term shareholder value and longer-term stakeholder value</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Depth—Leadership for deep learning and caring for others matters.</li> <li>2. Length—Sustainable leadership lasts</li> <li>3. Breadth—Sustainable leadership spreads, not just dependent on one person at the top.</li> <li>4. Justice—Sustainable leadership does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment</li> <li>5. Diversity—Sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity</li> <li>6. Resourcefulness—Sustainable leadership develops and does not deplete material and human resources</li> <li>7. Conservation—Sustainable leadership honours and learns from the best of the past to create an even better future</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Outcomes, not just outputs.</li> <li>2. Balancing short and long term objectives</li> <li>3. Processes, not plans</li> <li>4. Passion</li> <li>5. Personal humility and professional will</li> <li>6. Strategic timing and strategic abandonment</li> <li>7. Building capacity and creating involvement</li> <li>8. Development of strategic measures of success</li> <li>9. Building in Sustainability</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Builds capacity of staff</li> <li>2. Strategic distribution</li> <li>3. Consolidates</li> <li>4. Builds long-term objectives from short-term goals</li> <li>5. Diversity</li> <li>6. Conserves</li> </ol>

Author(s) discussing sustainable leadership	[19]	[17]	[29]	[20]	[21]
<b>Research context</b>	Private Sector-No real empirical research has been completed on sustainable leadership – really developed from the idea of burnout and the development of individuals.	Private sector research – exploring the different ‘honeybee’ and ‘locust’ organisations - comparing them, and producing the pyramid.	Education sector - looking at research from both the UK and the US stems from the idea that there are principles of sustainable leadership in schools.	Education Sector - looking at both UK and US.	Developing organisational leaders in the Education Sector - looking at both UK and US.

*Source: Adapted from Gerard et al. [41].*

**Table 2.**  
 Comparison of sustainable leadership frameworks.

#### 4.1 Identifying pitfalls and insights using constant comparison technique

After selecting the six frameworks of sustainable leadership, codes representing pitfalls and insights were delineated from these frameworks and models using open coding and constant comparison to develop broader categories.

Initially, the focus was on coding hidden or unsuspected challenges, omissions or potential difficulties, which can easily scupper any unsuspecting leader trying to engage or reinforce sustainable leadership using a particular framework. After that, the focus shifted to insights—the critical and underlying aspects of sustainability evident in a framework that can help solve new problems or give a deeper understanding. In this review, insight was used loosely to mean a pattern, which enhances an understanding of a specific cause and effect within a particular context. Insights capture commonalities regarding patterns of the ‘whys’ behind the behaviour and actions to exercise effective, sustainable leadership.

Each identified pitfall and insight was constantly compared with others already identified to form broad categories, which were ‘mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive’ (MECE) to avoid overlaps. Similar pitfalls and insights that emerged and developed into broader categories were given conceptual labels. These labels are used to depict results reported in the next section.

### 5. Results on pitfalls and insights of sustainable leadership

The results of pitfalls and insights on the individual and organisational levels of sustainable leadership delineated from the six frameworks are presented below as follows:

#### 5.1 Individual dimension of sustainable leadership

At the individual level, the findings reveal three pitfalls of sustainable leadership: A lack of accurate sustainability self-awareness, failure to realise the



diversity of strategic thinking competencies and a shaky foundation of sustainability literacy. Ethical competence as a foundation of ethical leadership and systems literacy constitutes two key insights if one is to practice sustainable leadership. These findings are traceable to the frameworks of sustainable leadership by Casserley and Critchley [19], Avery and Bergsteiner [17], Hargreaves and Fink [29], Davies [20], Lambert [21] and Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] as illustrated below:

#### *5.1.1 Lack of sustainability self and other assessment*

One of the pitfalls is that all six frameworks of sustainable leadership by Casserley and Critchley [19], Avery and Bergsteiner [17], Hargreaves and Fink [29], Davies [20], Lambert [21] and Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] fail to clearly emphasise the two forms of assessments, which together constitute sustainability self-awareness. For example, Casserley and Critchley [19] allude to generic awareness of personal purpose, assumptions, motivations and self-care. Notably, this type of self-awareness is not linked explicitly to sustainability, which is more relevant and fundamental for leading self-sustainably. Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] focused on the individual level in terms of creativity and personality but remained unclear on sustainability self-awareness. Avery and Bergsteiner [17], Hargreaves and Fink [28], Davies [20] and Lambert [21] skirted the issue of sustainability self-awareness as they have predominantly adopted an organisational perspective of sustainable leadership. Accurate sustainability self-awareness arises from balancing two types of self-awareness, namely internal self-awareness (how well you know yourself) and external self-awareness (how well you understand how others see you) [42]. Thus, accurate sustainability self-awareness is not one truth but a subtle balance of two separate, even competing, viewpoints. Accurate sustainability self-awareness is critical in balancing personal ethical values and business objectives when planning and implementing social and environmental responsibility activities. Sustainable leaders and followers get a realistic evaluation of their self-knowledge and self-understanding based on self-assessment and assessment by others, not only focusing on strengths, limitations, failures and vulnerabilities but also sustainability.

#### *5.1.2 Failure to realise the diversity of strategic thinking competencies*

The pitfall is that the frameworks of sustainable leadership emphasise the necessity of a long-term perspective as if this is the only strategic thinking competence. For instance, the framework by Avery and Bergsteiner [17] refers to only long- or short-term views and the capacity to endure over time. Hargreaves and Fink [29] discuss sustainability vision, values and holistic approach. Davies [20] hinge on the capacity to decipher strategic priorities and cohesive and longer-term development, while Lambert [21] focuses on commitment at all levels of leadership development. In each framework, there is a failure to recognise the broad scope and diversity of strategic thinking competencies critical for sustainability. Ledtka [43] asserts that there are five strategic thinking competencies: Systems perspective, intent-focused thinking, thinking in time, hypothesis-driven thinking and intelligent opportunism. With this in mind, it is clear that none of the frameworks in **Table 2** is inclusive enough to embrace all of these strategic thinking

competencies. However, each competence highlighted by Ledtka [43] is crucial for sustainable leadership. For example, the competence of systems perspective is about seeing the inter-connectedness, interdependencies and patterns in the various components over time. Second, the competence of intent-focused or vision-driven thinking is driven by goals, strategic intent and a sense of destiny. Third, the competence of thinking in time is about connecting the past, present and future (e.g. understanding the gap between the present and the desired future and the clear focus on what needs to be done and what can be done). Fourth, the competence of hypothesis-driven thinking is the ability to see and formulate future possibilities and plans as hypotheses. Lastly, the competence of intelligent opportunism requires balancing strategic intent with the flexibility to adapt to emergent opportunities in the environment (e.g. willingness to re-examine strategic intent and adapt the strategy to changing situations). As an aspect of strategic thinking, creative thinking includes gaining new insights and different ideas through existing information to see new patterns of how to reinforce sustainability. Market-oriented thinking helps sustainable leadership to search for alternative ways to attain sustainable competitive advantage. A broad scope of strategic thinking competencies by sustainable leadership helps to create transformative capacity, build resilience and implement systemic interventions while considering unintended consequences and cascading effects.

### *5.1.3 Shaky foundation of sustainability literacy*

The pitfall is the lack of sustainability knowledge, understanding and assessment at the organisation's top and some of the employees as human capital. While the framework by Casserley and Critchley [19] focuses on developing individual leaders' capacity for sustainability first, it is silent on sustainability literacy. Sustainability literacy combines the skills, attitudes, dispositions, values and understanding required to fashion a more sustainable future [44]. Lack or inadequacy of sustainability literacy among employees affects role clarity at all levels of the organisation and society. Sustainability literacy is also not conspicuous in the frameworks by Avery and Bergsteiner [17], who refers to the holistic capacity to endure over time and Hargreaves and Fink [28], who talks about breadth as sustainable leadership not dependent on people at the top only. Lambert [21] is conscious of the value of commitment from all levels and cultures but is not explicit on sustainability literacy as a building block for sustainable leadership practice. The inadequacy of sustainability literacy arises in three ways in an organisation [44]. First, the inadequacy of sustainability literacy occurs when sustainability is considered only for specialists or elites dealing with environmental issues or those in the upper echelon of the organisations. Consequently, the foundation for sustainable leadership is shaky due to the lack of widespread sustainability knowledge, skills and mindset. Second, limited sustainability knowledge, skills and values arise when there is little awareness of broad sustainability-related issues such as sustainability citizenship, basic ecology, poverty and values, which limit the actions and behaviours of leaders and employees. Sustainable literacy reinforces critical, holistic and systemic thinking competencies in dealing with complex sustainability challenges. Without sustainability literacy, people are unlikely to be fully equipped with the attributes and sustainability mindset that would enable them to take decisions that sustain rather than degrade the world around

them. Sustainability literate leadership and followership understand the need for change to a sustainable way of doing things, individually and collectively [44]. They have sufficient knowledge and skills to decide to act, favouring the triple bottom line. Lastly, a lack of clear understanding of the macro- and micro-level links of the social, economic and environmental perspectives affects the level of sustainable literacy. The shaky foundation of sustainability literacy is exacerbated when organisational leadership lack contextual clarity on environmental and social thresholds or 'do-not-exceed' resource limits to define the lines between sustainability and unsustainability.

#### *5.1.4 Systems literacy for sustainable leadership*

The model of the factors of sustainable leadership by Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] illustrates the insight of systems literacy as critical for leaders and stakeholders to understand the complex relations and trade-offs necessary in the triple bottom line to achieve sustainable performance. Understanding a system and examining the levels, linkages and interactions between the elements that comprise the whole system is essential to systems literacy and sustainable leadership. The model by Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] connects aspects of the individual, organisation and society in a manner that invokes systems thinking. Sustainable leadership with systems literacy view issues holistically and can see non-obvious, unfamiliar connections and conflicts between things while understanding why they behave a certain way.

The competence of systems thinking is critical for sustainable leadership to explore inter-relationships (context and connections), perspectives (each actor has their unique perception of the situation) and boundaries when dealing with problems and implementing solutions (agreeing on scope, scale and what might constitute an improvement) [40].

Avery and Bergsteiner [17] assert that sustainable leadership involves a four-layered pyramid and unity of elements at all levels (e.g. foundational practice, high-level, key drivers and performance outcomes), which forms a sustainable leadership system. The system is also when sustainable leadership collectively analyse complex systems across different domains (function, organisation, society, environment, economy, etc.) and different scales (local to global), thereby considering cascading effects, inertia, feedback loops and other systemic features related to sustainability issues and sustainability problem-solving.

#### *5.1.5 Ethical competence as foundational of ethical leadership*

The insight is that sustainable leadership manifests and promotes ethical values and behaviours, which are essential to building sustainable organisations and society. This insight is evident in two frameworks by Davies [20] and Avery and Bergsteiner [17]. For example, the framework of sustainable leadership by Avery and Bergsteiner [17] uphold the organisation's protection through modelling and reinforcing ethical behaviours by leaders. Ethical role modelling, communication of values and reinforcement of ethics by leaders are critical to send strong ethical cues and tone to actively and deliberately promote ethical decision-making and behaviour among followers. Davies [20] consider moral purpose as a critical aspect of sustainable leadership in an organisational context to give a sense of what is right and what is worthwhile in a manner that is accessible and useful to all followers whenever confronted by a moral problem. In this way, ethical leadership is not just the mere possession

of ethical competence but also the reputation for being ethically competent, which is necessary to influence others. As a foundation of ethical leadership, ethical competence constitutes conscious decisions and actions within a given responsibility situation. Sustainable leadership apply personal ethics to an organisational situation, called 'personal value-driven competencies', in order to strike an appropriate balance between what is ideal and practical to both the individual and organisation. Sustainable leadership promotes sustainability values and ethics at the individual, organisational and social levels.

## **5.2 Organisational dimension of sustainable leadership**

From the organisational perspective, three pitfalls of sustainable leadership identified are lack of sustainable human resources, absence of a sustainable organisational culture model and lack of clarity on the value of social capital. The review also reveals that organisational-level insights in the practice of sustainable leadership include stakeholder centricity, the complexity of driving sustainability innovation and managing the complexity of internal and external interdependencies. These are presented below as follows:

### *5.2.1 Lack of sustainability human resources*

The frameworks by Casserley and Critchley [19], Avery and Bergsteiner [17], Hargreaves and Fink [29], Davies [20], Lambert [21] and Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] alluded to developing people but are less explicit on the embedding of sustainability in the entire human resources management (HRM) processes and activities (e.g. recruitment, selection, training and development, compensation structures, pay and reward, performance management and culture) to develop sustainable human capital. Tang, Chen., Jiang, Paille and Jia [45] refer to green training and development as key to preparing multi-talented workers and improving competencies, knowledge and skills necessary to achieve sustainability.

While academic progress is made to elaborate frameworks and practices of sustainable leadership, there are still missing links, details and resources on how an organisation holistically and systemically incorporate sustainability into the various human resources activities and processes. In recruitment, sustainable organisations have a selection process to ensure that every new employee shares the sustainable organisational vision and values. They also measure the performance of their employees not only by productivity but also by the employees' behaviours consistent with the sustainability values and vision. Notably, the honeybee approach by Avery and Bergsteiner [17] reflects some but not all aspects necessary in the scope of sustainable HRM processes and activities. While this framework underscores positive relationships with labourers, valuing people, staff development, retention and succession planning to create sustainable well-being, human capital and organisational success, it is less explicit and intentional on how to humanise the working environment.

### *5.2.2 Absence of sustainable organisational culture model*

The framework and models of sustainable leadership are clear about the value of organisational culture. For example, Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] recognise the influence of organisational culture at individual and organisational

levels and intersection with society. Casserley and Critchley [19] and Avery and Bergsteiner [17] see sustainable leaders as powerful agents who create, maintain or change organisational culture. However, scholars of sustainable leadership have not provided a full-blown theory or exhaustive model on sustainability organisational culture. Although shared assumptions have been widely regarded as a fundamental cultural element, the literature on sustainability organisational culture does not explicitly address them. In Ref. [46], culture has been defined as a pattern of basic assumptions that organisational members share and learn as they encounter the problems of external adaptation and internal integration. Basic assumptions refer to unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, thoughts and feelings [46]. Over time as the pattern of shared basic assumptions becomes proven effective, it becomes valid and a lesson to be taught to new members as the right way to view, feel and think about the problems. In the context of sustainability, organisational members develop a configuration of common basic assumptions they have learned as their organisation effectively solves its sustainability problems [47]. Espoused values or strategies, goals and philosophies represent values. In the process, a value becomes an unconscious assumption about the sustainability problem and its context as the value serves to direct successful responses to the sustainability problem.

The sustainability organisation culture includes the values and beliefs subsystem. This subsystem comprises sustainability vision, beliefs and values articulated by leaders or organisational members [47]. Sustainability vision and values are interconnected [47]. A sustainability vision only conveys the meaning for the future, while values are how a vision can be turned into reality. Leadership modelling is among the most potent ways of creating, changing and maintaining organisational culture. How sustainable leaders act and carry out things, their values and beliefs and their transformations set the example for organisational members to follow.

### *5.2.3 Value of social capital is unclear*

The pitfall is that all of the six frameworks on sustainable leadership are silent on the value of social capital. For instance, Avery and Bergsteiner [17] underline caring for and developing people in an organisation and protecting the planet but fails to pinpoint the role and value of social capital for sustainable leadership. Davies [20] recognise the significance of building capacity for sustainability, but this is unclear whether it is limited to human capital or includes social capital. Traditional leadership uses social networks, norms of reciprocity and social trust for mutual benefit and access to different types of resources (e.g. financial, information, human and physical resources) [48]. However, it is not explicit how sustainable leaders nurture and develop their social capital to build networks and relationships for sustainability. There is a need for sustainable leadership frameworks to support leaders in using different types of social capital to ensure individual and organisational sustainable performance. Bonding, bridging and linking social capital are fundamental for sustainable leaders to build a network of support and resources to balance the triple bottom line. First, bonding social capital is the relations of trust, cooperation and networks of people who are similar or homogeneous in some critical way and typically associate together [48]. Bonding social capital is inward-looking, exclusive, within people who are alike or homogeneous and suitable for getting by" [48].

This type of social capital exists between ‘people who are’ in it together and who typically have strong and close relationships and networks with a high density of connections.

Second, bridging social capital refers to connections, interrelationships and networks of mutuality between people who are not similar or heterogeneous with respect to socioeconomic and other characteristics. Bridging social capital is inclusive between different people and is critical for ‘getting ahead’ [48]. Lastly, linking social capital is defined as the norm of relations between individuals and groups in different social strata in a hierarchy where power, social status and wealth are accessed by other groups [48]. Linking social capital is characterised by the collaboration of sustainable leaders when they relate with powerful people or institutions at different levels of societal and power hierarchy. Creating new trusting ties across power relationships and identifying and collaborating with power brokers are essential to sustainable leadership [48]. The sustainable leader is a node where multiple relationships intersect as people are relational beings. The node is crucial to pursue a shared sustainability vision, collective accountability and collaboration across subsystems. Sustainable leaders are the weavers of value networks and relationships with stakeholders and bridge builders to overcome systemic inertia, path dependencies and other barriers to reaching envisioned outcomes.

#### *5.2.4 Stakeholder centrality of sustainable leadership*

The insight is that stakeholder-centric leadership balances and integrates multiple relationships and objectives and promotes shared interests in an ever-changing VUCA in pursuit of the triple bottom line. Notably, the frameworks of sustainable leadership by Casserley and Critchley [19], Avery and Bergsteiner [17], Hargreaves and Fink [29], Davies [20], Lambert [21] and Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] are clear on the collective dimension as a critical part of sustainable leadership but also necessitate of stakeholder centrality. Building stakeholder trust and engaging with a broader range of stakeholders present an opportunity to achieve strategic objectives and minimise adverse impacts. Davies [20] assert that stakeholder centrality is vital for sustainable leadership to embed sustainability throughout the organisation. First, a stakeholder-based approach to sustainable leadership relies on collective or inclusive sense-making and collective intelligence to solve sustainable challenges. Collective understanding of the system and distributed leadership are salient in debating the system boundaries, mapping its elements and dynamics and considering the environment around the system that enables or impedes it. The lack of collective intelligence is evident in organisations, which tend to discount or insufficiently consider stakeholder perspectives when making decisions.

Second, sustainable leadership is not only limited to stakeholder inclusion and engagement but also the building of capacity. The frameworks by Lambert [21] hinge on the development of capacity for sustainability at all organisational levels. The framework by Davies [20] is aware of building capacity and leadership culture, which promotes sustainability in a school setting. The capability to create an inclusive and collaborative environment where diverse people have empathy, a voice and a sense of belonging are critical for sustainable leadership. Sustainable leaders unlock commitment and creativity for sustainability by being genuinely human and showing compassion and openness in their stakeholder engagement. Sustainable leadership advocates a more consultative and moral perspective rather than a skewed and

hierarchical view of stakeholders [17]. Lastly, the interactions with stakeholders impact the direction and execution of decisions, such as what knowledge is used, whose interests are recognised and what actions are prioritised by sustainable leadership. It is imperative to fathom how sustainable leadership drives decision-making with diverse stakeholders and, where possible, actively involve these stakeholders in jointly developing sustainable solutions and sharing sustainability benefits [17]. A vital part of the ‘challenge’ for sustainable leadership is that many stakeholders hold them more accountable.

#### *5.2.5 Complexity of driving sustainability innovation*

The insight is that sustainable leadership pursue sustainability innovation. For example, Avery and Bergsteiner [17] are explicit that innovation is one of the key performance drivers of sustainability. However, clarity on what constitutes sustainability innovation and how leaders advance this type of innovation in an organisation or society is missing. Sustainable leadership drives three sustainability innovation types: Operational, organisational transformation and systems building. Operational innovation is about the change of processes (doing the same thing better), which occurs in many areas, e.g. design, production, marketing and even HR. Organisational transformation creates disruptive new products and services that serve societal needs and benefit the environment. Lastly, systems building depicts the most advanced form of sustainable innovation. It involves **collaborating with others** to create positive impacts on people and the planet. Sustainable leaders see themselves as part of an ecosystem and recognise that any single organisation cannot achieve sustainability [40].

However, the challenge for sustainable leadership is to embed innovative capacity that focuses on the long-term survival of a sustainable organisation. Pursuing disruptive and sustaining innovation as part of sustainable transformation may be easy. However, it is tough to deliver without appropriate top management support and a network of leaders with sustainability literacy as a foundation to challenge traditional approaches and disrupt their organisations, business and industry to operate differently.

When sustainable leaders engage in sustainable innovation, they do not merely focus on their organisation. More importantly, they look more broadly at the whole system they are part of—including other organisations, the natural environment, stakeholders and communities as exemplified in the framework by Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40]. Sustainable leadership adopts systems thinking and understands how their actions affect other organisations and vice versa.

#### *5.2.6 Managing complexity of interdependencies and external collaboration*

Lastly, there is the insight into how sustainable leadership creates and influences connections between actors—across functions, levels, types of actors and sectors to adopt a holistic and systemic approach. Leaders grapple with the coordination dilemma between increasingly overlapping jurisdictions internally and externally. For example, the framework by Šimanskienė and Župerkienė [40] depicts interconnections or interfaces between an individual, organisation and society in pursuit of sustainability. An interface is the primary means of sustainable leadership’s daily work and roles when interacting with internal and external stakeholders. The framework by Avery and Bergsteiner [17] refers to four interdependent layers interacting

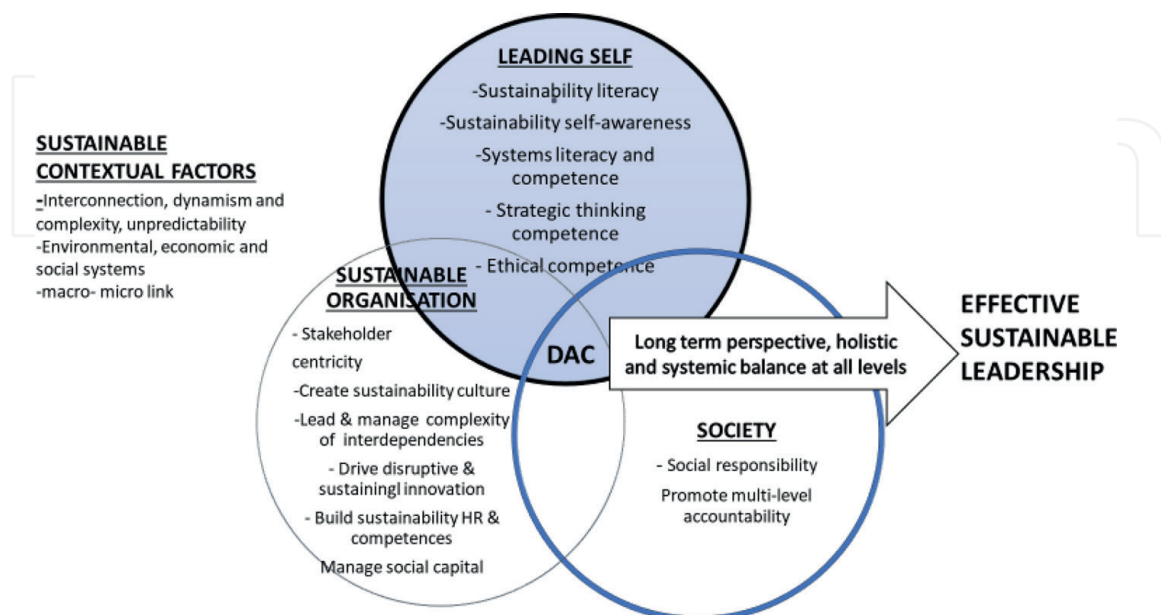
to yield sustainability. Managing interdependencies and trade-offs in interfaces and across levels within an organisation and external collaboration (e.g. suppliers, customers and even competitors) is key to enabling sustainable performance. A multi-level and layer-informed view of sustainable leadership forms a basis of a collective or shared understanding of the patterns, enablers and impediments in nested arrangements.

Davies [20] posit that strategic timing and abandonment drive decision-making and execution of strategic priorities involving various stakeholders and shared benefits. The challenge for sustainable leadership is choosing when and what strategic change to make. Strategic timing and strategic abandonment manifest in knowing what, knowing how and when and knowing what not to do [20]. Knowing what to give up or abandon to create the capacity to undertake the new sustainable activity is critical when actions and decisions take place to balance the triple bottom line and pursue a long-term perspective.

Multi-level, relationship and pattern-based sustainable leadership help deal with complexity, which relates to sustainability. Patterns of order and unity at different levels transcend differences amongst the elements at the meso and macro levels, which are part of the triple bottom line.

## 6. Proposed integrative framework of sustainable leadership and future direction

As shown in the insights and pitfalls in this review, sustainable leadership is complex and parsed into two broad dimensions: Individual and organisational. The proposed integrative framework of sustainable leadership brings together four different components: leading self, sustainable organisation and society, sustainable DAC and sustainability contextual factors shaping effective and sustainable leadership. It is noteworthy to underscore that sustainable leadership involves people and



**Figure 4.** Integrative framework of sustainable leadership. Source: Own.



is not context-free and inward-looking only. **Figure 4** depicts how the framework of sustainable leadership centralises sustainable DAC and integrates the leading of self and leading of sustainable organisation in the environment.

Below is a brief discussion of the critical elements of the integrative framework of sustainable leadership.

### **6.1 Sustainable DAC: long-term, holistic and systemic balance at all levels**

A 'sustainability lens' reframes the enactment of sustainable leadership within an 'open organisational and social system and centralises sustainable DAC in the economic, social, cultural and institutional context'. At the centre of the proposed framework of sustainable leadership is the sustainable DAC at the nexus of leading self, sustainable organisation and society in a sustainability context. Sustainable leaders recognise interconnections and interdependencies between the individual, team, organisation and society, which are key in a holistic pursuit of the triple bottom in an open environment. The sustainable DAC calls for long-term future orientation and envisioning (sustaining the needs of future generations), the anticipation and prevention of harmful unintended consequences. Sustainable leadership is systemic and holistic and incorporates the social, environmental and economic dimensions to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

### **6.2 Sustainability contextual factors**

Context is critical for sustainable leadership and constitutes a web of interwoven internal and external dynamic factors, which pose limits and demands that threaten. At the same time, some reveal opportunities for economic, environmental or social resources at the sectoral, local, regional or global level. Firstly, the context of sustainable leadership is characterised by dynamism, complexity and unpredictability, which interweave to depict environmental turbulence. Secondly, sustainable leadership is exercised in the interrelated environmental, economic and social systems. While leaders pursue organisational sustainability by simply comparing performance to past years or peers alone, sustainable leaders are also implored to make a comparison to limits and thresholds at the broader social and environmental levels.

Third, the contextual aspect of sustainable leadership also manifests by a macro-micro link of real-world social, economic and environmental spheres. This is pivotal for sustainable leadership and organisation to meaningfully understand the sustainability or unsustainability of their impacts in the short and long term in the local and global context. Sustainable leadership responds to macro-environment changes arising due to broad environmental factors that impact, to a lesser or lesser extent, many organisations, industries and sectors (e.g. climate change). Sustainable leaders also respond to microenvironmental changes specific to an organisation or the immediate location or sector in which they operate. Lastly, how a leader manages internal and external interdependencies and a web of interrelationships is critical in creating and sustaining an organisation. Sustainable leadership has a proactive approach to constantly scanning the broader and internal organisational environments to monitor internal and external changes regarding interdependencies and interfaces. Sustainable leaders reconfigure the organisational architecture and develop a sustainable relationship with internal and external stakeholders. As sustainability is the prism through

which activities to create value are strategized and executed, and success is defined and achieved, there is a need for sustainable leaders to apply a context-based approach to sustainability.

### **6.3 Characteristics and competencies of leading self sustainably**

Individual leaders who are sustainable rely on consciousness and sustainable literacy as a robust foundation in interactions and interrelationships in pursuit of sustainability. Leading self as a sustainable leader demands four different competencies to develop own mindset and attitude and support others in the pursuit of sustainability. The proposed integrative framework pronounces that accurate sustainability self-awareness, systems literacy, strategic thinking and ethical competencies are critical for sustainable leadership to balance the triple bottom line effectively. Leading self-sustainably is key initial step before the use of appropriate influence tactics (e.g. bargaining, building coalitions, assertiveness and creating goodwill) and role modelling of sustainable and ethical behaviours to influence others as a leader. The proposed integrative framework for sustainable leadership underscores the need to balance personal ethical values, business objectives and physiological and psychological well-being when leading others and planning and implementing social and environmental responsibility activities.

### **6.4 Sustainable organisation and society**

Sustainable leadership is stakeholder centric and involves multiple social influences, not limited to internal and external stakeholders. Sustainable leaders must facilitate different types of social capital, internal and external, to the organisation necessary to access network and relational-based sources. The organisational capability to develop, maintain and change to a sustainable organisational culture is salient for employees and leaders. Sustainability-oriented basis assumptions, espoused values and artefacts need mutually reinforce each other. Another critical organisational capability is leading and managing the complexity of interdependencies arising from interactions and relationships, which cross levels and boundaries in pursuit of triple bottom lines. While the capacity to drive incremental, sustaining innovation is critical, a sustainable organisation must pursue disruptive innovation in the various elements of the organisational architecture to operate in new sustainable ways. However, sustainability innovation and practices are not possible without infusing sustainability into the whole process of operations, strategy and HRM.

At the societal level, the organisational capability for social and environmental responsibility reflects the multi-stakeholder nature of sustainable leadership. Sustainable leaders focus on how their organisation positively contribute to society to grow social responsibility, preserve cultural heritage and promote ecological conservation. Ethical values and norms—specifically, the pro-environmental behaviours and values focused on strict social and environmental responsibilities—become crucial in sustainable leadership. Being socially and environmentally responsible pays off by increasing sustainability performance outcomes and stakeholder harmony.

One of the pragmatic implications of the proposed framework is that it provides insight into the nature of competencies, type of HR and value of sustainability literacy and culture as necessary building blocks for sustainably leading self, others and the organisation. In this way, the review has offered a valuable tool for leadership to focus their developmental effort on the various components at the individual and

organisational levels to practice effective, sustainable leadership at all levels to ensure organisational longevity. Future research needs to empirically test the proposed model to validate or alter it based on views of sustainable leaders in different contexts to enrich our understanding of sustainable leadership further.

## **7. Conclusion**

The chapter has presented and analysed a variety of seminal and influential frameworks and models of sustainable leadership to primarily illuminate potential pitfalls, which can easily scupper any unsuspecting leader or scholar. Additionally, the chapter has highlighted insights to enhance an accurate and deep understanding of the nature and practice of effective, sustainable leadership, which is pivotal for practitioners who enact sustainable leadership.

There is no scholarly consensus on the meaning of sustainable leadership. However, what is clear from this review is that sustainable leadership is complex, multi-dimensional and parsed into individual and organisational-level capabilities, which integrate into the pursuit of DAC. Sustainable leadership does not have a singular focus on the organisation as it pursues DAC typified by the long-term perspective, holistic and systemic balance in the triple bottom line, which embraces broader society.

The proposed integrative framework of sustainable leadership brings together the individual, organisation, society and sustainability context, which shape sustainability-oriented DAC. This framework is crucial in providing tools for leaders grappling with embedding sustainability in their organisations. It is also a catalyst for future academic research on sustainable leadership. Scholars need to develop more pragmatic and theoretically-informed frameworks that adopt a systems lens to integrate the individual, organisation and society while taking cognisance of the multi-dimensional nature of sustainability and the challenges of pursuing a sustainability-oriented DAC.

## **Conflict of interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## **Notes/thanks/other declarations**

None.

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