

# Sustainable Leadership, The Way Forward to Achieve Sustainable Development in the Corporate World

ISSN: 2688-836X



**\*Corresponding author:** Elena Bulmer, Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Sociales, URJC, Spain & Department of Operations and Data Science, EAE Business School, Spain

**Submission:**  November 4, 2022

**Published:**  November 11, 2022

Volume 12 - Issue 4

**How to cite this article:** Elena Bulmer\* and Magali Riera. Sustainable Leadership, The Way Forward to Achieve Sustainable Development in the Corporate World. *Nov Res Sci.* 12(3). NRS.000792. 2022. DOI: [10.31031/NRS.2022.12.000792](https://doi.org/10.31031/NRS.2022.12.000792)

**Copyright@** Elena Bulmer, This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

**Elena Bulmer<sup>1\*</sup> and Magali Riera<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Sociales, URJC, Spain & Department of Operations and Data Science, EAE Business School, Spain

<sup>2</sup>Department of Human Resources, EAE Business School, Spain

---

## Abstract

“We are a sustainable company” is a statement that is increasingly made by companies in recent years and being able to make such a claim has come to be considered as bestowing a competitive advantage. Corporate sustainability entails the organization’s considering their environmental and social impacts, alongside their economic benefits not only in the short-term but also in the long-term. Organizations nowadays are constantly changing and are open to potential changes and a special type of leadership is needed to deal with the latter. As is implicit in the term itself, sustainable leadership denotes a leadership style that is carried out over the long term and that is based on acting in a fair and ethical manner with all stakeholders. This small review presents a short compendium of sustainable leadership philosophies, highlighting Avery and Bergsteiner’s framework based on bee and locust leadership perspectives. Sustainable leadership therefore needs to consider equity, environmental justice, intergenerational equity, and governance.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Leadership; Sustainability; Corporate leadership; Sustainable development goals

---

## Mini-Review

“We are a sustainable company” is a statement that is increasingly made by companies in recent years and being able to make such a claim has come to be considered as bestowing a competitive advantage. The integration of sustainability practices into operations and processes has become a must if an organization wishes to remain competitive in their market and in their industry. The benefits of committing to sustainability are colossal and includes money saving, risk mitigation and winning more clients (i.e., and therefore more investment). In a changing world the role of business is key, and corporations can therefore play an important role in the development of sustainable societies and in contributing to sustainable development in general. Corporate sustainability entails the organization’s considering their environmental and social impacts, alongside their economic benefits not only in the short-term but also in the long-term. Therefore, adopting a long-term context has helped companies to get through difficult times and to overcome challenges of all kinds, crises of all descriptions, to survive recessions and even to overcome pandemics such as the current COVID-19. A further element that has been shown by different researchers to have contributed to the survival and success of organizations in these difficult periods is the quality of their leadership.

Leadership is a concept that has very varied interpretations and to date no single definition has been accepted by all [1]. Despite there being considerable literature on leadership, it remains one of the most misunderstood business phenomena. However, what can be agreed upon is that leadership is important. When leadership is poor or absent, the results may sometimes be disastrous, affecting stakeholders at all levels, inside and outside the company [2]. It is therefore essential for a company leader to adapt different leadership styles to be able to achieve corporate objectives, and in order for it not to lose its competitive advantage.

Organizations nowadays are constantly changing and are open to potential changes. Companies refusing to change will undoubtedly suffer in their operational effectiveness [3,4]. Therefore, to retain agility and flexibility, another concept of leadership has arisen, the “sustainable leadership” style. As is implicit in the term itself, sustainable leadership denotes a leadership style that is carried out over the long term and that is based on acting in a fair and ethical manner with all stakeholders [5]. Traditionally, companies operated under more authoritarian or top-down leadership scenarios. Today, we are moving towards business models that are more people- and community-oriented. In this respect the advantages of SL outweigh the disadvantages, entailing a greater participation of work teams in the decision-making processes and in the organization’s development. All this, when combined, leads to the company gaining a positive brand reputation and greater social respect. Research has analysed sustainable leadership in several different settings, such as educational contexts and organizational structures [5-7]. The first SL model dates to 2006 and was developed by Hargreaves and Fink who investigated sustainable leadership at the organizational level in the educational sector. According to these authors, SL promotes an educational context that promotes the interchange of opinions and ideas.

In 2010, Casserley and Critchley developed a model that aimed at promoting SL through the development of sustainable leaders, thereby operating not at the organization level but at the individual level. They described the performance of sustainable leaders as being based on three core elements: (1) reflection on action, (2) psychological intelligence, and (3) physiological well-being. This model would need to be accompanied by the engagement of the internal stakeholders of the organization. According to these authors, sustainable leaders were more likely to create sustainable organizations [8]. According to Kouzes and Posner (2007), good leaders must be honest, forward-thinking, efficient, encouraging, and intelligent, as well as having the ability to be flexible and to adapt to the specific context of the organization. Thus, a sustainable leader must also care and inspire others to care about the well-being of humanity and of all forms of life and nature.

Avery and Bergsteiner [9] developed a SL model that is based on 23 key factors that underlie sustainable leadership, which, if undertaken together, will contribute over time to organizational performance improvement. Compared to Davies’ [7] and Lambert’s (2011) models, Avery and Bergsteiner’s sustainable leadership framework has been applied to a more ample variety of contexts and not just the educational sector. Sustainable leadership according to Avery and Bergsteiner [9] goes beyond just complying with the three pillars of sustainability, which are financial, social, and environmental. Their framework contrasts management perspectives that follow a Honeybee philosophy, a style of leadership described as “sophisticated, stakeholder, social and sharing, with others that tend towards a Locust approach which is regarded as “tough, ruthless, asocial and profit-oriented-at-any-cost”. The Honeybee elements, if fulfilled in an organization, lead to a competitive advantage by leading it to becoming more sustainable

in the long-term. The leadership philosophy of the locusts is mainly based on obtaining profits, to the point of wanting to obtain them at any cost [10]. Avery and Bergsteiner’s model has been previously studied at the organizational level firstly by Kalkavan [11], who analysed sustainable leadership among managers in the Turkish insurance industry, and by Bulmer et al. [12] who examined sustainable leadership levels among female managers in the logistics industry in Spain [12].

The bee leadership perspective provides a vision of social leadership with the participation of all stakeholders. It is more holistic in nature and is based on generating value for all stakeholders. All this leads to the prioritization of values aligned with the seventeenth sustainable development goal of the United Nations, that of creating global alliances. Although it has been shown that the application of bee leadership in companies is more sustainable and profitable in the long term, many national and international companies continue to apply a more conventional model, such as the locust model, prioritizing short-term benefits [10]. The key to success is to integrate sustainability into the company’s business strategy and initiatives. Today, companies use their commitment to sustainability as a competitive advantage, broadly speaking. They want to continue differentiating themselves from the competition, just as they did previously with the incorporation of corporate social responsibility into their organizational strategy. However, in both cases, it is difficult for this commitment to become rooted within an organization, and not be limited to a simple brand communication tactic to reach the consumer’s top of mind [13]. The key to success, and to real sustainability, is its consideration in business strategies. Also, decisive and indispensable is the presence of SL at the organizational level. Innovation and employee well-being is a top priority, thereby, leadership should be based on ethical and caring behaviour. Moreover, SL should also consider equity, environmental justice, intergenerational equity, and governance and a sustainable leader should also be concerned with caring for the well-being of humanity and all forms of life and nature itself.

## Reference

1. Veenbaas W, Weisfelt P (2004) *Persoonlijk Leiderschap*. Uitgeverij Nelissen, Netherlands.
2. Gndolfi E, Stone S (2016) Clarifying leadership: High impact leaders in time of leadership crisis. *Rev Int Comp Manag* 17(3): 212-224.
3. Collier J, Esteban R (2000) Systemic leadership: Ethical and effective. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 21(4): 207-215.
4. Scott JE (1998) Organizational knowledge and the Intranet. *Decision Support Systems* 23(1): 3-17.
5. Hargreaves A, Fink D (2006) *Sustainable Leadership*. Leadership & Administration (K-12), John Wiley & Sons Publishers, USA, pp. 1-344.
6. Tuppen C, Porritt J (2003) *Just Values: Beyond the business case for sustainable development*. BT & Forum for the Future, UK.
7. Davies B (2007) Developing sustainable leadership. *Management in Education* 21(3): 4-9.
8. Casserley T, Critchley B (2011) A new paradigm of leadership development. *Industrial and Commercial Training* 42(6): 287-295.

9. Avery GC, Bergsteiner H (2011) Sustainable leadership. Honeybee and locust approaches. 1<sup>st</sup> (Edn.), Routledge Publishers, USA, pp. 1-288.
10. Dvir D, Sadeh A, Malach PA (2006) Projects and project managers: The relationship between project manager's personality, project types, and project success. *Project Management Journal* 37(5): 36-48.
11. Kalkavan S (2015) Examining the level of sustainable leadership practices among the managers in Turkish insurance industry. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 207: 20-28.
12. Bulmer E, Riera M (2021) Promoting sustainable leadership among female managers in the spanish logistics industry. *International Journal of Legal Ethical & Regulatory* 24(1): 1-20.
13. Crews DE (2010) Strategies for implementing sustainability: Five leadership challenges. *SAM Advanced Management Journal* 75(2): 15-21.