

Sustainable Leadership Among Company CEOs. A common Practice?

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Introduction

The concept of sustainable leadership is gradually becoming widespread. The term implies a leadership style that recognises and respects longer-term considerations and is based on behaving fairly and ethically with all stakeholders. Adopting a long-term perspective has helped companies survive hard times, such as market downturns and economic recessions, and intense global competition, and exceptional situations such as the very recent COVID-19 pandemic that we have experienced over the course of the past three years. According to Crews [1], it is essential to ensure that all stakeholders are considered when organizations are strategically targeting Sustainable Development. This includes the taking into account of the differing aims and perspectives of each, including any who may be vulnerable or overlooked. An example of the latter might be employees with special needs and who might need support in building awareness of the principles of sustainable development, as well as training, re-skilling, and up-skilling to ensure their sustainable employment. Customers and clients, as primary stakeholders, should of course be included in this exercise, an additional benefit being the building with them of long-term relationships of mutual trust and engagement, besides the generation of a positive corporate image and reputation of trust and integrity in the wider market. Leadership for sustainability requires leaders to demonstrate exceptional abilities. They should be able to map a strategic path to guide and manage their organization through myriad complex situations, think through complicated strategic and tactical problems, besides dealing with stakeholders dynamically and adaptively according to their emotional intelligence needs Metcalf [2]. Often the leader is considered to be a role model in the sense that it is his or her role to incorporate sustainable practices in the organization's business operations. Furthermore, the leader should also be able to promote and enable sustainable behaviour among all company employees. Studies on sustainable leadership have been carried in very varied contexts, in different educational settings and organizational structures [12,26,27]. The first sustainable leadership model was developed by Hargreaves [3] who analysed sustainable leadership in the educational sector. According to these authors sustainable leadership enables the nurturing of an educational context that promotes the interchange of opinions and ideas. They present seven core principles of sustainable leadership that are indispensable: sustained learning created and preserved, success secured over time, sustained leadership of others and issues of social justice addressed, human resources developed rather than depleted, environmental diversity and capacity developed, and activist engagement with the environment undertaken.

Other authors such as Davies [4] & Lambert [5] also created sustainable leadership models at the organizational level in the education sector both in the United Kingdom and the United States [4,5]. According to Davies [4], sustainable development entails identifying

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and developing key elements that serve to nurture the sustained and long-term evolution of the school. Such leadership is based on a moral purpose that provides success that is shared and accessible to all at all levels. According to Lambert [5], sustainable leadership requires engagement at all organizational levels so as to generate a culture in which leadership skills and a ladder to personal development may evolve. Avery [6] developed a sustainable leadership framework that will contribute over time to organizational performance improvement. The model divides organizations into two main categories, which are known as (1) "Locust leadership" and (2) "Honeybee leadership". The honeybee leadership philosophy is stakeholder-oriented and promotes a social and shared approach to leadership.

It is more integrated in nature and very much based on stakeholder value generation. Although the honeybee model has been shown to be more sustainable and profitable in the long term, today many organizations still persevere with a more locust-based leadership model, which principally deals with generating profit at any cost, even though it might entail the harming of the natural environment. We recently carried out a comparative study whose aim was to analyze the level of sustainable leadership using Avery [6] framework among CEOs in Spain and Poland. The main objective of this research was to analyse how Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in Spain and Poland perceived the level of sustainable leadership at their companies. The results of the study demonstrated that leadership among CEOs in Spain and in Poland was very much inclined towards the bee sustainable leadership philosophy. However, although it has been demonstrated that the application of the bee leadership philosophy 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.

Most of the Spanish and Polish CEOs interviewed seemed to care for their employees as well as for their training and development. Furthermore, they showed an interest in caring not only for internal organizational stakeholders but also external stakeholders ranging from shareholders to the different communities surrounding or dependent on the organization, one might say the organization's

wider family. The bee sustainable leadership model emphasises the need for leaders to engage with stakeholders at all levels, thus helping to motivate staff, resolve or defuse conflicts and empower individuals. Soft management skills are essential in this respect.

Most Spanish and Polish CEOs considered that doing "good" and building constructively for the longer-term was more imperative than making a higher short-term profit, in the process highlighting those long-term goals that needed to be prioritized over short-term ones. Furthermore, the importance of working closely with all stakeholders to ensure alignment with a mutually beneficial longer-term perspective is generally very well appreciated by those stakeholders. The results demonstrate that the path toward sustainable leadership has been and is being followed by leaders in both Poland and Spain. The Polish and Spanish CEOs' visions of sustainability were very similar in a considerable number of aspects. CEOs in both countries seemed to share the path being favoured within the EU of adopting and implementing a longer-term perspective over short-termism and inconsiderate profit maximisation. Similarly, they declared their belief in continuous training and development of all staff, preferring to promote staff within the organization, and attaching a great deal of importance to their welfare.

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