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Ethical Leadership and Corporate Sustainability: A Qualitative Survey of Daily Managerial Practices

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CHAPTER 0 – INTRODUCTION

The growing interest in the world of corporate leadership and its ongoing evolution in the face of contemporary transformations represents the fundamental motivation that guided the entire research process of this thesis. In the current socioeconomic landscape, marked by profound instability, the drama of the climate crisis, and a progressive redefinition of stakeholder expectations, the figure of the leader has lost the traditional connotations of mere hierarchical control and short-term operational efficiency. Leading an organization today no longer simply means managing resources or maximizing immediate financial returns, but requires the ability to navigate complex contexts, assuming precise ethical, social, and environmental responsibility to the community and future generations. This awareness prompted me to investigate how the sustainability paradigm is redefining the very essence of corporate management, transforming it from a predominantly managerial function to a value-based and systemic guide. The treatment is divided into three closely interconnected chapters, designed to build a logical and methodological bridge between the theoretical literature, the strategic-operational dimension and the empirical verification conducted in the field.

In the first chapter I aimed to lay the conceptual foundations of the investigation, retracing the historical and theoretical evolution of leadership studies. By examining classical models, from early approaches focused on the innate traits and characteristics of the leader to behavioral and contingent theories, it clearly emerges how scientific research has progressively transcended the vision of the leader as a solitary or infallible figure. The chapter then delves into the affirmation of contemporary styles, with a specific focus on transformational, charismatic, and servant dynamics, before focusing on the paradigm of ethical and responsible leadership. This section

analyzes how the leader's authority is based on behavioral consistency, phronesis, or practical wisdom, and the ability to create a "Circle of Safety" within which reducing fear and promoting trust allow people to best express their human and professional potential.

In the second chapter, the reflection moves on to the integration of sustainability into corporate strategy, analyzing the role of the leader as the driving force behind the ecological transition. Starting from the reconstruction of the concept of sustainable development and the Triple Bottom Line model, the discussion examines how sustainability has moved from a predominantly philanthropic or bureaucratic compliance dimension to an essential pillar for creating shared value and managing transition and physical risks related to the climate crisis. Attention is then focused on the figure of the Sustainability-Oriented Leader, outlining his fundamental skills, such as systemic optics, emotional intelligence, the ability to manage complex trade-offs and the application of green change management models. The chapter is finally enriched by an analysis of supporting operational tools, including eco-design, Life Cycle Assessment, and sustainable supply chain management, and by an examination of emblematic business cases that demonstrate the concrete feasibility of these principles in the industrial landscape.

In the third and final chapter, the thesis takes on an empirical dimension, aimed at investigating how the theoretical principles outlined so far are translated and experienced in everyday managerial practice. Moving from the gap identified in the literature, which tends to undermine macro- or meso-level analyses by neglecting the behavioral micro-practices of *Embodied Sustainable Leadership*, the research is structured on a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with key management figures. Through firsthand experiences and *critical incidents*, the chapter explores everyday decision-making choices, how leaders address the tensions between economic profitability and socio-environmental impact, managing communication

transparency, and the levers used to foster a climate of psychological safety and *green empowerment* within their work teams.

The entire framework of this work therefore aims to demonstrate how sustainable leadership does not represent a simple declination of modern management, but rather the only strategic, ethical, and behavioral posture capable of ensuring the longevity of the company and guiding organizations towards a future of shared prosperity.

CHAPTER 1 – LEADERSHIP

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive overview of the concept of leadership, distinguishing it from managerial management and formal authority, and exploring how theories have evolved over time to respond to organizational challenges. The chapter's structure is divided into three main sections: the first analyzes fundamental definitions and classical theories (from the "Great Men" approach to the contingent one); the second delves into different leadership styles, including charismatic and transformational ones; the third section is dedicated entirely to ethical and responsible leadership, understood as a paradigm of community service and protection

1.1 Definition and main leadership theories

Leadership is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating and discussed topics in corporate organizational matters, which, at the same time, receives a high degree of attention even in extremely different fields. This strong focus on the concept of leadership, and consequently on the figure of the leader, is evident thanks to the ongoing debate regarding the definition of this expression; the debate has not yet led to a single formula for the concept but has left different interpretations of the term. Generally speaking, Goleman's (2001 - Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence) definition, which interprets leadership as “the ability to influence people and help them work better to achieve a common end goal”, is considered an explanatory sufficient.

First, a line must be drawn between the managerial and leadership plans, referring to the tasks and attitudes that concern the two roles. If the leader is seen as a guide who chooses which direction to move the organization and

consequently has the primary duty of making all those decisions aimed at achieving vision, the manager is responsible for organizing the work and completing the activities entrusted to him, assuming responsibility exclusively for the operations that fall within his competence and are necessary to achieve the expected results. From this perspective, the figure of the leader stands out because it is oriented towards innovation, the development and inspiration of people, the definition of a vision projected in the long term and the creation of new opportunities. The manager, on the other hand, has a more operational role, overseeing, coordinating, and managing daily activities, with a particular focus on achieving established short-term goals.

Second, we need to analyze the need to distinguish the exercise of leadership from the use of power. Pilati and Tosi (2017, p. 269) describe leadership as an essential function for the functioning of organizations and as a highly effective form of social coordination, as it involves mutual influence between people, the ability to orient them, and the conscious assumption of responsibility. This conception differs profoundly from the simple use of formal authority, which is based on more coercive mechanisms and relationships determined predominantly by hierarchical position and institutional roles, rather than by the bond built between leaders and collaborators.

It is possible to recognize how leadership differs substantially from formal authority and the exercise of power, while frequently emerging in individuals who occupy positions of responsibility and whose choices influence the work and activities of other members of the organization. This finding has given rise to numerous theoretical classifications of leadership which, while not attributing the hierarchical role as the sole source of legitimacy for the leader, are nevertheless conditioned by the traditional pyramidal configuration that characterizes most companies operating in capitalist contexts. With the evolution of organizational thinking and the emergence of more modern models, the presence of forms of leadership detached from formal roles has

begun to be recognized. This is particularly evident in teams and working groups created for specific objectives, where operational relationships are determined not by traditional hierarchy, but by members' ability to influence each other and contribute to the coordination of the collective.

Starting from these reflections, Bryman (1992) proposes a systematization of the main approaches considered “classical” in the study of leadership, offering a reconstruction of the historical development of the theories and research conducted on the topic and articulating them in the following classification:

- The Great Man Theory
- The Trait Theory
- The Behavioral Theory (o Style Approach)
- The Contingency (Situational) Theories

The classification just referred to, which is elaborated upon in the following paragraphs, offers an overview of the main traditional approaches to the study of leadership. However, the most recent perspectives, such as those relating to ethical, charismatic, shared, inclusive leadership and many others, remain outside this framework and will be examined in the following chapters.

1.1.1 The Great Man Theory

Great Man Theory can be defined as the first theory concerning the topic of leadership. This theory is recognized by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), a Scottish writer and philosopher. In 1841 he published a work called “On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History”, and it was thanks to this work that Great Man Theory was born. The latter explains how there are some individuals, mainly men, sent to earth by divine will with the aim of leading humanity to an evolutionary stage.

The work was born in a historical context characterized by profound crises and radical transformations, marked by events such as the Napoleonic Wars and the process of industrialization. In such a scenario, Carlyle felt the need to identify a source of strength, moral orientation, wisdom, and spiritual elevation. The break with Calvinism also led to a progressive detachment from the Church, which ceased to represent for the author a point of reference capable of offering guidance and stability. This research eventually led him to the elaboration of the figure of the Great Man, conceived as a human individual but, at the same time, invested with a divine mission.

The central question that Carlyle poses regarding the problem of authority: who would have been responsible for exercising it and what characteristics the men called to lead humanity would have to possess. In his work *On Heroes*, the writer provides an answer to these questions, identifying the figure of the hero as the subject destined to lead humanity. This hero is defined as Able-man, that is, an individual invested with a divine mission and given a power of a superior nature in his relationship with men. Carlyle outlines its characteristics in the following terms: "The most skilled man; he also means the most sincere, the most just, the noblest man: what he tells us to do must be exactly the wisest, the most suitable, which we could learn anywhere or in any way; – the thing that suits us in every way, with just and loyal gratitude and without any doubt, to do!" (Carlyle, 1841). The Great Men were sent by God to be heroes and these heroes became leaders acting towards the due process of hero worship. Below is one of the most important known and cited passages from the opening of *On Heroes*: "Because, in my opinion, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is ultimately the History of the Great Men who worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones, the shapers, the models and, in a broad sense, the creators of all that the general mass of men could do or achieve; all the things we see accomplished in the world are properly the external material result, the practical realization and

embodiment of the Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the history of the whole world, one can rightly consider, if the history of these.” (Carlyle, 1841).

The idea that leadership is exclusively the result of innate characteristics appears outdated today and lacks a solid empirical foundation. While some people possess qualities that can foster recognition of a leadership role from birth, numerous studies have shown that such skills can be developed over time and that most successful leaders are the result of a training and learning process (Halaychick, 2016). Carlyle's work has been the subject of widespread criticism, both from his contemporaries and from more recent scholars. As Halaychick (2016) points out, the historical value of Great Man Theory lies not so much in Carlyle's specific statements or his exaltation of the figure of the hero, but rather in the initial contribution offered to the identification and subsequent formalization of some fundamental attributes of leadership.

It is not particularly surprising that Carlyle's theories were subsequently taken up and reinterpreted during the twentieth century, coinciding with the rise of the Nazi and Fascist regimes. Totalitarian systems were, in fact, based on the centrality of the figure of the dictator, conceived as an individual placed in a position of clear superiority over the rest of the population and invested with the power to determine collective destiny. This conception presents clear analogies with the Great Man outlined by the Scottish writer, called to lead the people by virtue of his own exceptionality.

1.1.2. The Trait Theory

Trait Theory represents a direct evolution of Great Man Theory and developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even according to this theoretical approach, leaders can be distinguished from non-leaders based on the possession of specific individual traits. The focus is on the personal attributes

of the leader, which may include physical and personality characteristics, skills, and values. Leadership is therefore analyzed exclusively from an individual perspective, implicitly assuming that such traits generate relatively stable and consistent behavior patterns across different situational contexts. As highlighted by Hernandez et al. (2011), Trait Theory was initially also formulated as a function of personnel selection processes, with the aim of identifying whether certain characteristics, such as intelligence, sociability or reliability, could facilitate the identification of “natural” leaders. According to this approach, organizations tend to achieve better levels of performance when individuals placed in managerial positions respond to a clearly defined leadership model. The widespread use of personality assessment tools in staff hiring and selection processes (Northouse, 2013) is placed in this perspective.

With the publication of the essay *Personal Factors Associated with Leadership: A Survey of the Literature* (1948), Ralph Stogdill was among the first scholars to question Trait Theory, arguing that the possession of certain individual characteristics was not sufficient, in itself, to ensure the effectiveness of leadership. According to Stogdill, in fact, the traits required of a leader vary depending on different situations: the effectiveness of leadership depends jointly on the specific challenges the individual is called upon to face and the characteristics of the social environment in which he or she operates. As a result, attributes that are functional to success in one context may prove ineffective in another. Leadership is therefore conceived as a situational phenomenon, for which it is not possible to define a priori a universal set of optimal characteristics of the leader.

Drawing on Stogdill's contribution, Northouse, in *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (2010), proposes a reconceptualization of leadership as a relational process rather than as an intrinsic quality of the individual, stating that: “Rather than being a quality that individual possesses, leadership was reconceptualized as a relationship between people in a social situation.

Personal factors related to leadership continued to be important, but researchers challenged that these factors were to be considered as relative to the requirements of the situation.”

Throughout much of the twentieth century, numerous scholars have delved into Trait Theory with the aim of identifying the fundamental characteristics that a leader should possess. Below is a summary table that collects the main contributions of the most relevant researchers in this field, along with the leadership traits they identified.

Table 1.1 Evolution of the leader traits

Stogdill (1948)	Mann (1959)	Stogdill (1974)	Lord, DeVader e Alliger (1986)	Kirkpatrick e Locke (1991)	Zaccaro, Kemp e Bader (2004)
Intelligence Alertness Insight Responsibility Initiative Persistence Self-confidence Sociability	Intelligence Masculinity Adjustment Dominance Extroversion Conservatism	Achievement Persistence Insight Initiative Self-confidence Responsibility Cooperativeness Tolerance Influence Sociability	Intelligence Masculinity Dominance	Drive Motivation Integrity Confidence Cognitive ability Task knowledge	Cognitive abilities Extroversion Conscientiousness Emotional stability Openness Agreeableness Motivation Social intelligence Self-monitoring Emotional intelligence Problem solving

Source: Own elaboration from Zaccoro, Kemp, & Bader (2004).

A particularly significant contribution to the development of Trait Theory studies was made by Stogdill himself through two fundamental works, published in 1948 and 1974 respectively. A comparative analysis of the various traits identified in the literature shows that some of them occur more frequently and can therefore be considered central to the study of leadership: among these are intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. Northouse (2010) proposes a critical evaluation of Trait Theory, highlighting both its strengths and main limitations. Among the positive aspects, the author emphasizes, first, how the trait approach responds to the widespread need to conceive of leaders as individuals with distinctive characteristics compared to

others, thus emphasizing their uniqueness. Second, unlike many other leadership theories, Trait Theory is based on over a century of research, which strengthens its scientific strength. A further strength lies in the fact that it represents one of the few approaches focused exclusively on the figure of the leader, without directly including followers and situational context. Finally, the theory provides useful guidance as reference criteria both in leader selection processes and in the development of leadership skills.

Alongside these positive elements, Northouse (2010) also highlights several limitations of the approach. First, the difficulty of identifying a clearly defined and universally valid set of traits to identify an effective leader. Second, Trait Theory does not adequately consider the influence of situations on leadership dynamics, nor the interaction between leader traits and the target organizational context. Furthermore, the identified traits are often subjective and variable depending on the author and the theoretical framework adopted. Finally, the approach has limited practical applicability, as people's psychological traits are difficult to change through training interventions.

1.1.3 The Behavioral Theory (or Style Approach)

In contrast to Trait Theory, this new theoretical strand emphasizes leader behavior, focusing exclusively on what leaders do and how they behave in carrying out their role (Northouse, 2013). According to Northouse, leadership can be analyzed by distinguishing two main categories of behavior: task behaviors and relationship behaviors, which refer to task orientation and relationship orientation, respectively. The Style Approach therefore aims to explain how leaders manage to combine these two orientations in order to exert effective influence on their subordinates.

The main empirical contributions attributable to this approach derive from studies conducted at Ohio State University, the University of Michigan and the model developed by Blake and Mouton.

The first studies carried out at Ohio State University, in the late 1940s, follow in the footsteps of Stogdill's (1948) thought, according to which leadership cannot be understood by referring exclusively to individual traits. The researchers then focused on analyzing the behaviors implemented by leaders in managing groups and organizations. To this end, employees of several companies were administered a questionnaire aimed at assessing the behavior of their superiors, known as the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ), developed by Hemphill and Coons (1957).

Data analysis revealed two fundamental dimensions of leadership behavior: initiating structure and consideration. The first concerns the set of behaviors geared toward achieving goals and executing tasks, such as work organization, structuring the operational context, defining responsibilities, and planning activities. The second dimension, consideration, instead refers to relational behaviors, including aspects such as camaraderie, respect, trust, and sympathy in the relationship between leader and follower.

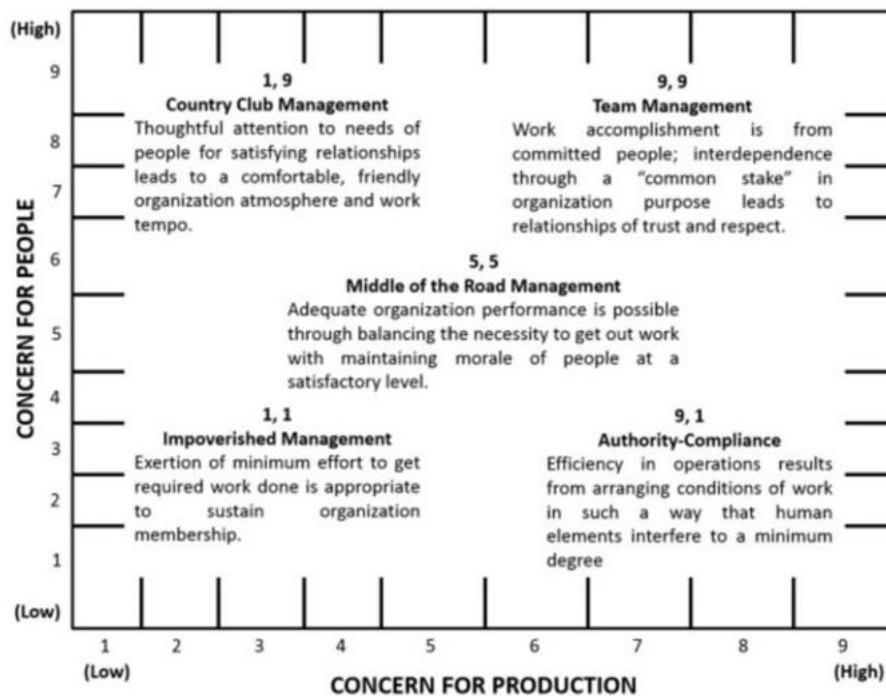
The study was undertaken at the University of Michigan in the early 1960s and it was designed to investigate the effect of leadership behaviors on the performance of small work groups. The researchers discovered two forms of behavior: employee orientation and production orientation. The first orientation refers to leaders paying particular attention to employees. The leader is concerned with interpersonal relationships and the well being of the members of the group, like the dimension of consideration that appeared in studies at Ohio State University. Production orientation, on the other hand, focuses on the technical and operational aspects of work, conceiving employees primarily

as means for achieving organizational objectives, in line with the dimension of the initiating structure identified in previous studies.

The third main line of research attributable to the Style Approach is represented by the works of Blake and Mouton (1964, 1978, 1985), who developed one of the best-known models of managerial behavior: the Managerial Grid, later renamed the Leadership Grid. This model was designed to explain how leaders contribute to achieving organizational goals through two fundamental dimensions: a focus on production (concern for production) and a focus on people (concern for people). The first dimension concerns the leader's degree of focus on achieving organizational goals and outcomes, while the second refers to the consideration and care given to organizational members committed to achieving those goals.

Five main leadership styles emerge from the Leadership Grid. The first, Authority–Compliance Management, is characterized by a high production orientation and a low focus on people, with a strong emphasis on efficiency. The second, Country Club Management, prioritizes employee well-being and satisfaction over production results. The third style, Impoverished Management, stands out for the leader's low level of commitment in both dimensions. Middle-of-the-Road Management represents an intermediate position, with a moderate balance between attention to production and people. Finally, Team Management is characterized by a high level of attention in both dimensions and is generally considered the most effective style within the model.

Figure 1.2 Five main leadership styles



Source: Dinibutun, Sait. (2020).

Blake and Mouton argued that leadership effectiveness was determined by the combination of production orientation and people orientation. Northouse (2013) proposes a critical evaluation of this approach, highlighting both its main strengths and related weaknesses. Among the positive aspects, first and foremost, the Style Approach has contributed to a significant shift in focus in leadership research: from a conception focused exclusively on the leader's personality traits, we have moved to an analysis based primarily on the behaviors implemented in the performance of the role. Second, it is a theory supported by a broad and well-established basis of empirical studies. Finally, the approach emphasizes the importance of a balance between task orientation and attention to interpersonal relationships, highlighting how both aspects are relevant to the exercise of leadership. Alongside these elements, Northouse (2013) also identifies some limitations. In particular, research conducted under Behavioral Theory does not allow us to establish a clear and systematic relationship between specific leadership styles and performance

outcomes. Furthermore, the approach fails to define an “ideal” model of leader behavior that is universally effective, regardless of context and situation.

1.1.4 The Contingency (Situational) Theories

Contingency theories of leadership focus on analyzing the role that situational factors play in the effectiveness of leadership styles and behaviors. These approaches assume that neither the leader's personal characteristics, nor his or her behaviors, nor even the adoption of specific leadership styles are sufficient in themselves to ensure effective leadership exercise. Rather, the central element becomes the ability to adapt the driving style to the different contextual conditions that the leader faces. In this sense, as highlighted by Cruz et al. (2011), among the main contributions attributable to contingency theories are Fiedler's contingency theory (1964, 1967), Path–Goal Theory and the Leader Participation Model. Among the contingent models, the most widely accepted and used in the leadership literature is the Contingency Model of Leadership developed by Fiedler (1967). The scholar, considered one of the leading psychological researchers of the twentieth century, developed this model as a response to the limitations highlighted by trait and behavioral theories, which were no longer considered adequate to explain the complexity of leadership dynamics. According to Fiedler, in fact, the effectiveness of leadership varies depending on the situation and requires the adoption of different driving styles to achieve high group performance.

Within the contingent perspective, as illustrated by Northouse (2013), it is possible to distinguish mainly two leadership orientations: task motivated and relationship motivated. Task-oriented leaders focus their action on achieving goals and effectively executing activities, while relationship-oriented leaders place greater emphasis on building and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. To identify the prevailing leadership style, Fiedler introduced the

Least Preferred Coworker (LPC) scale, an instrument aimed at measuring the leader's degree of relational or operational orientation. A high score on the LPC scale indicates a prevalent relational motivation, while a low score reflects a more task-focused orientation. The LPC scale requires leaders to rate a person they have worked with in the past but would prefer not to collaborate with again, scoring them based on a series of adjectives, both positive and negative. Leaders with high LPC scores generally tend to give more favorable ratings even to the least liked collaborator, showing greater attention to relationships and a cooperative orientation, sometimes prioritizing the quality of the relationship over the outcome. Conversely, leaders with low LPC scores assign more negative ratings and tend to prioritize goal achievement, focusing on interpersonal relationships primarily based on the effectiveness of the work performed.

Contingency theory identifies three main situational variables through which the conditions under which leadership is exercised can be described: leader-member relationships, task structure, and leader's position power. Leader-member relationships concern the quality of the social climate within the group and the level of trust, loyalty, and acceptance members develop toward the leader. In a cooperative and conflict-free environment, these relationships are positive, while a climate characterized by tension and hostility leads to weak and ineffective relationships. Instead, task structure refers to the degree of clarity with which objectives, procedures and responsibilities are defined: highly structured tasks tend to increase the control and influence of the leader, while vague or poorly formalized activities reduce his or her ability to direct. Finally, the leader's position of power concerns the formal authority derived from the role he or she holds within the organization and includes the possibility of exercising rewards or sanctions against group members; this power is high when the leader has relevant decision-making prerogatives, such as hiring or

firing staff or granting salary increases, while it is limited when such responsibilities do not fall within his or her remit.

The combination of the three situational variables previously described determines the degree to which organizational contingency is most favored. Situations are most favorable when they present high levels of leader–member relationship quality, high task structuring, and a solid leader position of power; conversely, they tend to be less favorable when there are weak leader–follower relationships, poorly defined tasks, and limited formal authority. In conclusion, we can state that contingency theory states that the effectiveness of leadership depends on the alignment between the style adopted and the characteristics of the situation. In particular, task-oriented leaders, identified by a low score on the LPC scale, are more effective in both highly favorable and highly unfavorable contexts, that is, in extreme situations characterized by a high degree of control or, conversely, by conditions of high uncertainty. Relationship-oriented leaders, characterized by a high LPC score, tend to express maximum effectiveness in moderately favorable contexts, where there is a certain level of stability, but where conditions are neither completely under control nor completely unpredictable.

1.2 Leadership Styles

Since the 1980s, the profound transformations that have affected the economic and organizational context have led to a redefinition of the concept of effective leadership. In this scenario, previously dominant theoretical approaches began to show clear interpretative limitations. As Conger and Kanungo (1994) observe, traditional distinctions between task-oriented and people-oriented leadership, as well as major contingent models, including LPC theory and path-goal theory “”, appeared insufficient to address the new and complex challenges that characterized organizations in the 1980s. The changing competitive environment, marked by greater uncertainty, innovation, and

dynamism, required different skills, strategic vision, and interpersonal skills than those valued in previous decades. In response to these changes, so-called contemporary theories of leadership have gradually emerged, which have broadened the perspective of analysis to include symbolic, value-based, and motivational dimensions. Major styles that have emerged during this period include charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, laissez-faire leadership, servant leadership, and, most recently, ethical leadership, which will be explored in more detail in a dedicated chapter.

1.2.1 Charismatic Leadership

The introduction of the concept of charisma into leadership studies can be traced back to Max Weber, who used it to describe a form of authority based not on traditional or formal legitimacy, but on the recognition by followers of qualities considered extraordinary in the leader (Weber, 1947). According to Weber, charisma is configured as a particular mode of influence based on the perception that the leader possesses exceptional qualities, almost superhuman in nature, which distinguish him from other individuals and justify his role as leader. This form of leadership tends to emerge especially in contexts of social crisis, where an individual manages to assert themselves by proposing an innovative and radical vision capable of offering a response to collective difficulties; in these circumstances, followers do not simply harbor trust and respect for the leader, but develop forms of strong identification and devotion. Subsequent theoretical elaborations have contributed to systematizing the concept of charismatic leadership in an organizational key. Charismatic leaders are described as figures with high communication skills, capable of conveying a clear, optimistic, and engaging vision, arousing enthusiasm and commitment among followers. Central to this perspective is the role of vision, considered one of the main sources of charisma, as it allows the leader to direct collective

action towards goals perceived as significant and morally relevant. House (1977) identifies among the building blocks of charismatic leadership the trust of followers in the leader's beliefs, acceptance of his authority, affection towards him and willingness to willful obedience. In his theoretical model, House emphasizes both the personality characteristics and typical behaviors of the charismatic leader: distinctive traits include dominance, a strong desire to exert influence, high self-confidence, and the presence of solid moral values; behaviorally, such leaders serve as role models consistent with the promoted values, appearing competent in the eyes of followers, They formulate ideological objectives with a marked ethical dimension, express high expectations towards collaborators and demonstrate confidence in their abilities, thus strengthening their self-efficacy and motivation. Furthermore, they are able to activate deep needs in their followers, such as a sense of belonging, the desire for recognition and the search for power or self-realization. The effects of charismatic behavior manifest themselves in the internalization of the leader's values, loyalty to him, and a strong personal identification with his figure. In line with Weber's approach, House believes that such dynamics are particularly intense in situations of uncertainty or difficulty, when followers are more inclined to give the leader a saving role. Subsequently, Conger and Kanungo (1987, 1988) reworked charismatic leadership theory by adopting an attributional perspective, according to which charisma does not constitute an intrinsic quality of the leader, but rather a characteristic that is recognized and attributed by followers based on the interpretation of observed behaviors and the results achieved. From this perspective, the charismatic leader stands out for his ability to formulate and communicate an inspiring vision and for his ability to implement behaviors that make himself and his mission perceived as exceptional and out of the ordinary.

1.2.2 Differences and similarities between Charismatic and Transformational Leadership

If Max Weber (1947) analyzed charisma mainly in the political field, the first applications of the concept to the organizational context developed between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, a period in which, parallel to studies on charismatic leadership, a new line of research began to emerge: transformational leadership. Initial contributions are attributed to James MacGregor Burns (1978), who also focused primarily on political leadership; the concept was later taken up and expanded in the managerial field by scholars such as Bernard M. Bass (1985), who applied it to processes of organizational change. From this perspective, the term “transformational” was used to describe leaders capable of promoting profound transformations, oriented towards ambitious goals and accompanied by a strengthening of the role and autonomy of collaborators. In academic debate, the concepts of charismatic and transformational leadership gradually overlapped, to the point of sometimes being considered almost synonymous; however, Bass argued for the need to distinguish them, arguing that charisma represents only one component of transformational leadership. Despite this theoretical distinction, his empirical evidence showed how charisma constituted a central element of the transformational model. From both perspectives, the presence of a clear and engaging strategic vision plays a key role in mobilizing and empowering followers. According to Jay A. Conger and Rabindra N. Kanungo (1994), the difference between charismatic and transformational leadership lies not so much in the concrete behaviors adopted by the leader, but in the theoretical angle through which the phenomenon is analyzed: studies on charismatic leadership have focused predominantly on the perception of the leader's behaviors (perceived leader behavior), while the transformational approach has placed greater emphasis on the outcomes produced on followers (follower outcomes). This orientation reflects Burns's original approach, according to

which the primary function of the transformational leader is to raise the level of motivation and awareness of followers, stimulating their personal and moral growth. On the contrary, the first elaborations of charisma, matured in the sociological and political fields, focused above all on the characteristics of the leader and the contextual conditions that favored an intense response from followers. It follows that the two models, in the organizational literature, are more complementary than alternative, since they interpret a similar phenomenon favoring different perspectives. In short, the charismatic leader is characterized by high self-confidence, a defined and forcefully communicated vision, sometimes unconventional behaviors, and a role as a promoter of change while maintaining awareness of environmental constraints. His main actions include modeling himself, building a coherent image, clearly defining goals, expressing trust in his followers, and constantly motivating them. The transformational leader, on the other hand, encourages collaborators to reinterpret their work from new perspectives, strengthens awareness of the organizational vision, fosters the development of individual skills and encourages the overcoming of personal interests in favor of collective goals; its distinctive behaviors include empowerment, the construction and sharing of vision, action as an agent of change and the promotion of shared values and rules. The analogies between the two approaches concern the focus on vision, values, and the inspiring ideal embodied by the leader; the main differences lie in the fact that, while in charismatic leadership charisma represents the central and identifying element, in the transformational model it constitutes only one of the components of the influence process, in addition to the different emphasis on the effects of context, to the lower centrality of the personalistic dimension in the transformational model and the potential risks associated with an excessive focus on the leader typical of some forms of charismatic leadership.

1.2.3 Transformational Leadership

The term transformational leadership was first introduced by James V. Downton (1973), but its affirmation as a central approach in leadership studies is linked above all to the work *Leadership* (1978) by political sociologist James MacGregor Burns, who proposed a rereading of the relationship between leader and follower with an emphasis on the motivational dimension of the relationship. According to Burns, leadership cannot be understood without considering the mutual interaction between those who lead and those who follow: the leader acts on the motivations of followers, orienting them towards shared goals that satisfy both parties. Within this framework, he distinguished between transformational leadership and transactional leadership; the latter, which is the most widespread form in traditional models, is based on a contingent exchange between leaders and followers, as in the case of a politician who promises benefits in exchange for consent or a manager who offers rewards for achieving certain results. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, is based on a deeper bond, capable of increasing the level of motivation and awareness of both parties, with leaders attentive to the individual needs of their followers and committed to promoting their full realization; from this perspective, organizational change becomes a natural consequence of transformational action, as the leader promotes new possibilities, strongly supports a positive vision of the future and reduces resistance through value involvement. In the mid-1980s, Bernard M. Bass (1985) expanded and systematized the theory, taking up Burns' contributions and integrating them with the reflections on charismatic leadership developed; he subsequently worked on developing the Full Range Leadership Model, a model that includes three leadership styles: transformational, transactional and laissez-faire, the latter characterized by a minimal level of intervention and influence. Bass placed particular emphasis on the emotional and symbolic dimension of charisma, arguing that it constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition for defining leadership as transformational, since the latter involves a

broader process of motivational and value-based elevation of followers. According to Bass, the transformational leader stimulates collaborators to exceed initial expectations by acting on three main levers: increasing awareness of shared ideals and values, promoting the priority of collective interests over individual ones, and encouraging them to pursue higher-level needs. From this perspective, transformational leadership is oriented towards improving performance and developing followers' potential, through the construction of a strong and shared value system that directs action towards the common good. In the Full Range Leadership Model, Bass outlines transformational leadership as having 4 basic components, the "4 I": idealized influence, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Idealized influence is the charismatic part of the approach and outlines how the leader becomes an ethical and behavioral point of reference that generates respect, trust and affiliation among followers. It has an attributive component, associated with followers' perceptions and attributions, and a behavioral component, associated with the leader's concretely observable acts. Inspirational motivation is the ability to express an attractive and inspiring idea and to inspire enthusiasm and optimism. Intellectual stimulation is shown in the support for creativity, critical thinking and questioning of accepted patterns, leading to autonomy and inventive problem solving. Finally, individual consideration is expressed in personalized attention to followers' needs, through mentoring, coaching, and delegation activities aimed at professional and personal growth, thus helping to create an organizational climate based on support and continuous development.

1.2.4 Transactional Leadership

In the organizational studies landscape, transactional leadership emerges as a profoundly distinct approach from transformational leadership, as it does not

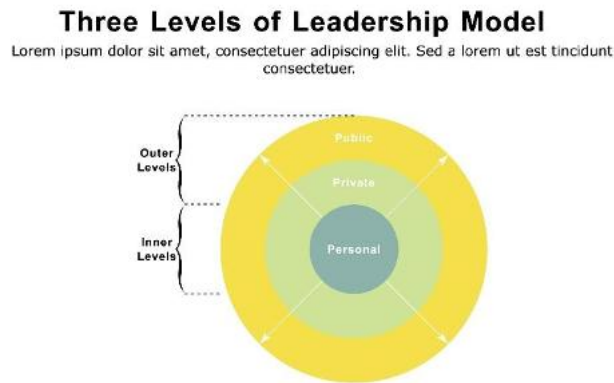
focus its action on the intrinsic needs or personal development of collaborators. The effectiveness of this style lies primarily in a convergence of material interests: the influence of the leader is exercised because subordinates recognize that acting in accordance with the directives received responds to their own personal gain. This orientation, which in the literature has sometimes been associated with authoritarian management, exploits the bureaucratic structure, formal authority and legitimate power to monitor and direct the actions of followers (Bennet, 2009).

The operational core of the transactional leader consists of setting rigorous working standards, systematically assigning tasks, and pursuing goals aimed at tangible results. The emphasis is almost exclusively on task performance and completion, making significant use of reward and punishment mechanisms to guide behavior. Fundamentally, this dynamic is configured as a contractual transaction between leader and follower, in which a high-level work performance corresponds to adequate economic or professional recognition (Bass, 1990). In this sense, the leader deepens his knowledge of subordinates' desires not for educational purposes, but to use them as a motivational lever in exchange for achieving the desired goals. Unlike transformational leaders, who act as catalysts for change, transactional leaders tend to favor the stability and continuity of internal processes.

According to the Full Range Leadership Model, transactional leadership is divided into two main components: the contingent reward and the management-by-exception. The contingent reward (CR), or conditional reward, represents the explicit exchange process in which the effort expended by the collaborator is compensated with a reward defined a priori. The leader and follower negotiate an agreement regarding the tasks to be performed, clarifying the benefits resulting from their fulfillment. It is, in essence, a logic of "quid pro quo" in which commitment is the currency of exchange for the reward; a basic

example can be found in the family dynamic in which a parent grants access to a recreational activity only after completing school obligations.

Figure 1.2 Three levels of Leadership Model



The second component, management-by-exception (MBE), is instead based on the use of corrective criticism and negative feedback. It can manifest itself in active (MBE-A) or passive (MBE-P) form. In its active configuration, the leader constantly monitors the work of collaborators to anticipate any deviations from the rules or procedural errors, intervening with immediate corrective actions. An example is provided by the sales manager who oversees the interaction between employees and customers on a daily basis to promptly rectify non-compliant approaches. Conversely, the passive form provides for a leader's intervention only following the manifestation of a problem or failure to meet standards. In this case, corrective action is a reactive response to already established errors, as in the case of a supervisor who negatively evaluates an employee without having previously established a dialogue about their performance. Both modes, however, rest on negative reinforcement patterns.

Despite operational divergences, the scientific literature highlights that the most effective leaders can integrate both transformational and transactional behaviors. Transformational leadership is closely associated to good outcomes including intrinsic drive, self-efficacy, creativity and job engagement. However,

contingent reward behaviors have been found to make a major contribution to managerial satisfaction and effectiveness. Conversely, empirical research indicates that both types of management-by-exception tend to be negatively related to organizational performance and atmosphere, showing the limitations of management based primarily on error control and rectification.

1.2.5 Laissez-faire Leadership or Nonleadership

This style is characterized by a substantial absence of leadership. Leaders who adopt this approach tend to avoid accountability, procrastinate on decisions, fail to provide feedback, and devote limited effort to supporting their collaborators in meeting their needs. No form of exchange is established with followers, nor does a real intent to promote their development emerge. The leader does not offer a defined direction, leaving employees with a high degree of autonomy, without however worrying about motivating or guiding them in a structured way. In this context, it is the collaborators themselves who hold decision-making authority, independently managing both decision-making processes and problem solving. Such a style can only be effective in the presence of highly qualified, competent and highly motivated employees.

1.2.6 Servant Leadership

The term servant leadership can be literally translated as “servile leadership”. This approach originates from the studies of Greenleaf (1970, 1972, 1977). Servant leaders place particular emphasis on the needs of their staff, promoting relationships based on empathy and personal care. From this perspective, followers take a central position: the leader is committed to holding them accountable and promoting the full development of their potential.

These leaders are distinguished by a strong ethical orientation and a sensitivity towards the well-being of the organization, the community and society as a whole. The best-known definition of servant leadership is proposed by Greenleaf (1970), according to which: "Servant leadership begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead..." According to Greenleaf, the distinctive element of the servant leader lies in the ability to go "beyond one's self-interest" (going beyond one's self-interest), privileging the development of others. Unlike other leadership styles, where the ultimate goal is organizational well-being, servant leadership places service to followers at the center. Unlike transactional leadership, which is based on the exercise of power to achieve goals, the servant leader seeks the trust of collaborators as the primary lever of influence. From this perspective, power does not represent a goal, but rather what emerges is the desire to serve others, accompanied by a strong ethical commitment to followers, organizations, and stakeholders. Although some people appear naturally predisposed to this style, it is still possible to learn and develop it over time.

Spears (1995) is one of the scholars who has contributed most to systematizing Greenleaf's thought, identifying ten fundamental characteristics of servant leadership:

1. Listening: enhancing communication and the ability to understand others;
2. Empathy: Recognizing and accepting people for who they are;
3. Healing: Supporting individuals in achieving personal well-being;
4. Awareness: Maintain a high level of attention and vigilance;
5. Persuasion: influencing through arguments rather than hierarchical authority;
6. Conceptualization: developing a vision that goes beyond the short term;
7. Prediction: Anticipating the consequences of actions also through intuition;

8. Management (stewardship): building trust and taking responsibility towards others;
9. Commitment to people's growth: fostering personal, professional, and, in some cases, spiritual development;
10. Community Building: Recognizing the central role of communities in individual well-being.

Subsequently, other authors have expanded this model, introducing additional elements such as the valorization of human capital, humility, authenticity, mutual acceptance, and the ability to provide clear direction and effectively manage people.

1.2.7 Emerging Theories on Leadership

In recent years, numerous scandals and inappropriate behavior attributed to leadership figures have sparked debate on issues such as morality, fairness, values, and integrity. In light of these critical issues, the literature has progressively developed new theoretical perspectives oriented towards the integration of ethical and value principles into the concept of leadership. Among these, ethical leadership, spiritual leadership and authentic leadership stand out in particular (Hernandez et al., 2011).

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership can be defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making”. Brown et al. (2005) highlight how collaborators tend to adopt more ethical behaviors when the leader manifests coherence between values, attitudes and actions. In such contexts, followers are more likely to reproduce ethical decision-making

processes, prosocial behaviors, and a positive orientation toward work, thus helping to reduce counterproductive behaviors.

Spiritual Leadership

The introduction of the concept of spiritual leadership represents a significant evolution from traditional views. Empirical studies suggest that values such as integrity, honesty, and humility are positively related to leadership effectiveness. According to Fry (2003), a central element is represented by “spiritual survival”, understood as a combination of the need for vocation (making a difference) and belonging (being recognized and valued within a group). Spiritual leaders are able to create a vision that satisfies the need for vocation and promote an organizational culture based on mutual care, responding to the need for belonging. This approach helps increase employee engagement and productivity.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership represents one of the most established perspectives among emerging theories, focused on values and personal growth. It has its roots in positive psychology and positive organizational literature. This approach is based on the idea that awareness of oneself, one's values, and one's beliefs, combined with the ability to act consistently with them, positively influences followers' attitudes and behaviors. Authentic leaders not only make an impact within the organization, but are also able to extend their positive influence to broader social issues.

1.3 Ethical And Responsible Leadership

This section is meant to demonstrate a major paradigm change, from bureaucratic control of resources to moral and value-based direction of people. The objective is to show how corporate success is no longer inherently linked

to stakeholder well-being and the pursuit of the common good, positioning the leader as an agent of change for a morally reformed society.

The structure of this in-depth study is organized into six thematic areas:

- Definition and paradigm of the ethical model: analysis of the concept of "practical wisdom" and behavioral integrity.
- The value pillars and the service philosophy: exploration of the core values (respect, honesty, justice) and the concept of Ubuntu applied to the enterprise.
- The biological dimension: an in-depth look at the "Circle of Safety" (Circle of Safety) and how brain chemistry (oxytocin, serotonin, cortisol) influences cooperation and trust in the group.
- Managerial practices: The importance of firsthand knowledge of the field, long-term vision, and humility in recognizing error.
- Contemporary Challenges and SDGs: The Role of Responsible Leadership in the Face of New Generation Demands and Sustainable Development Goals.
- Conclusions: A summary of the figure of the leader understood as a guardian of trust and guarantor of the stability of the human community.

1.3.1 Definition and paradigm of the ethical model

Ethical and responsible leadership is not a simple extension of traditional managerial skills, but represents a fundamental paradigm shift in organizational theory, shifting the focus from mere bureaucratic management of resources to the moral and value guidance of people. In academia, it is defined as the manifestation of normatively appropriate conduct, expressed through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and actively promoted among collaborators through two-way communication, reinforcement processes and transparent decision-making accountability

(Brown et al., 2005). This model radically distances itself from the 20th-century paradigm of "shareholder value maximization," proposing instead a vision in which the leader acts as a transformative agent committed to the pursuit of the common good. In this context, leadership activity is interpreted as the vision, embodiment and realization of a morally transformed society, where the success of the enterprise is indissoluble from the well-being of all stakeholders: employees, customers, community and the natural environment (Dames, 2009).

From an ontological point of view, the ethical paradigm is based on the cardinal virtues of classical derivation, justice, wisdom, courage and self-control, which do not remain abstract concepts, but become a "practical wisdom" (phronesis) capable of integrating moral considerations with the instrumental needs of the company (Koopman, 2009; Tolstoy et al., 2025). This type of leadership necessitates that decisions are made based on what is best for the community and not just what is best for the leader or the immediate budgetary bottom line (Harvard DCE, 2024). The ethical leader, therefore, knows that his or her power is not derived from a ranking in the hierarchy, but from the consistency between the principles announced and the acts performed, a phenomenon called behavioral integrity (Sinek, 2014). This way the corporation is changed from a collection of competitive individuals to a collective community in which profit is not the main goal, but the "fuel" to run the corporate culture and for people to develop (Myburgh, 2009).

A distinctive element of this paradigm is the assumption of a "parental" or custodial responsibility towards collaborators. The ethics leader accepts the mission of caring for the lives entrusted to the organization, committing to creating what Simon Sinek calls the "Circle of Safety". Within this protected space, the reduction of endogenous threats, such as office politics, intimidation or arbitrary dismissals, allows people to invest their psychophysical energies in cooperation and innovation, responding to the natural biological inclinations of

the human being towards trust and mutual aid (Sinek, 2014). Ultimately, ethical and responsible leadership is configured as a service mission aimed at growing one's followers to become leaders themselves, ensuring the stability and flourishing of the human community in the long term.

1.3.2 The value pillars and the philosophy of service

The architecture of ethical leadership is built on a constellation of cardinal values that transform the exercise of power into a moral commitment to the community. Six core values (respect, responsibility, service, honesty, fairness, and community) are the pillars of organizational literature and practice. In an ethical environment, mutual respect is not a one-way submission to hierarchy, but the recognition of the intrinsic value of each individual's skills and contributions, creating healthy work relationships which boost overall productivity (Harvard DCE, 2024). Simultaneously, the ethical leader must show behavioral integrity by taking full responsibility for his/her actions and decisions, avoiding the blame culture and acting honestly even in the face of failures or serious challenges (Askew, 2022). Such transparency and communicative honesty represent not only moral choices, but true reputational assets that generate loyalty in the long run and allow collaborators to make correct decisions based on truthful information (Dames, 2009).

A crucial element in this value transition is the overcoming of the notion of formal authority in favor of authority. While authority derives exclusively from the hierarchical role and coercive power assigned from above, authority arises spontaneously from the recognition that collaborators pay to the leader for his credibility, reliability, and moral competence. The ethical leader does not need to assert his strength through command, since his ability to listen and the coherence between words and works make him a naturally accepted and followed guide. In this context, the exercise of justice and fairness transcends

mere observance of the law to embrace a deeper sense of impartiality, ensuring that every stakeholder, employee, customer, or community member receives the treatment and recognition they deserve within an organization perceived as a complex social entity (Dames, 2009).

The conceptual basis of the ethical paradigm is Servant Leadership, a model that identifies the leader as “servant by vocation”. Leadership within this paradigm is not a privilege, but a responsibility; the “price” of leadership is the sacrifice of self-interest in an effort to defend and advance the group. It resonates powerfully with the African idea of Ubuntu (“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” – “I am because we are”) that stresses the fundamental interconnectedness between the individual, the enterprise and society. This perspective is not of the firm as a lone atom seeking profit but as part of an integral social fabric where economic success cannot be separated from collective well-being and the accomplishment of a morally reformed society (Dames, 2009). In conclusion, the service philosophy and value pillars examined here configure the leader not as a mere administrator of resources, but as the ultimate guardian of trust and organizational integrity, constantly oriented towards the pursuit of the common good.

1.3.3 The biological dimension: the "Circle of Safety"

The effectiveness of ethical leadership does not lie exclusively in philosophical constructs or abstract management models, but is rooted in the biological and anthropological nature of the human being. As "social machines," individuals are evolutionarily programmed to operate in cooperative groups; this inclination has allowed the species *Homo sapiens* to survive in hostile ancestral environments thanks to its ability to collaborate to face external threats. In this context, the primary task of the responsible leader is the creation and maintenance of the so-called "Circle of Safety", a protective barrier that

separates external threats, such as market volatility or technological evolution, from internal organizational dynamics. By reducing endogenous risks within this perimeter, like as power disputes or fear of arbitrary layoffs or isolation, collaborators can direct their psychophysical energies outside, toward creativity, resilience and strategic cooperation (Sinek, 2014). The group members' brain chemistry directly mirrors this kind of environmental dynamics, which makes their behaviors a function of the balance of specific neurotransmitters. Endorphin and dopamine are responsible for physical endurance and tangible goal achievement respectively, but the biological backbone of trust and loyalty is the prosocial neurotransmitters, serotonin and oxytocin. Serotonin, dubbed the "leadership chemist," promotes the bonding of mutual responsibility between the leader and the collaborator, while oxytocin is responsible for strong attachments and psychological safety, enhancing the immune system and improving cognitive skills. An ethical work atmosphere encourages the release of these hormones and the group thrives; inadequate leadership encourages the chronic release of cortisol. This stress hormone is essential for emergency responses, but when it is constantly present it actively blocks the release of oxytocin, making workers naturally more selfish and less likely to collaborate (Sinek, 2014). The importance of psychophysical safety at the workplace is confirmed also by empirical evidence, such as Whitehall Studies, which has shown that pathological stress is not related to the hierarchical rank but to the perception of control the workers exercise over their activity and to the perception of support coming from superiors. People outside the Safety Circle are far more at risk of heart disease and mental health problems, showing that a toxic culture damages the health of its members (Harvard DCE, 2024).

Ultimately, ethical leadership embodies the ancient Spartan military ideal, in which the strength of unity came from the solidity of the shield, intended to protect the entire deployment and not the individual. By providing this "top-

down coverage," the responsible leader ensures that each collaborator feels valued as a person, transforming the organization into a cohesive community ready to sacrifice itself for a common vision because it is driven by the biological certainty that the leader, faithful to his mission, will be the last to eat to ensure the protection of the group (Sinek, 2014).

1.3.4 Management practices: knowledge, vision and humility

The operational translation of ethical leadership presupposes, first of all, a deep and analytical knowledge of the work context and the subjects who operate there (Dames, 2009). Acquiring this awareness often requires a period of direct immersion in production dynamics, preferably anonymously to avoid prejudice and foster a true understanding of technical and emotional critical issues, as historically exemplified by the Agnelli family's educational model. Only through this expertise gained in the field can the leader acquire authority based on credibility and empathy, transforming his role from a detached supervisor to a guide aware of the needs of collaborators (Sinek, 2014).

Alongside pragmatic knowledge, ethical action is inseparable from a forward-looking vision that can look beyond the contingency of immediate profit to orient itself towards the sustainability and long-term stability of the organization. This approach requires an assessment of the systemic effects of each decision, not only in terms of economic balance sheet parameters, but also in terms of impact on human capital and community, as shown by the strategies of companies such as Illy and Costco, which have favored the protection of workers even in times of severe economic crisis. The vision must also be translated into concrete and humanly meaningful goals, able to inspire

collaborators toward a collaborative mission that goes beyond the simple rise in growth indicators (Sinek, 2014).

Finally, management effectiveness is in the practice of humility and acceptance of the principle of “Trial and Error”, which accepts the natural fallibility of the directorial figure (Askew, 2022). Unlike the “narcissus leader” approach, the ethical officer knows his or her limits and encourages the flow of information, understanding that error, if honestly disclosed, is a chance for communal learning and progress, not a fault to be punished. This spirit of service and transparency cements the link of confidence in the “Circle of Safety,” as collaborators see the behavioral integrity of a leader who values the good of the group over his own image of infallibility.

1.3.5 Contemporary challenges and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Ethical leadership is defined not through formal rank or authority, but through the assumption of a caring responsibility towards the human lives entrusted to the organization (Dames, 2009). The leader acts as a guardian of trust, whose primary mission is to maintain and expand the "Circle of Security," eliminating endogenous threats, such as office politics or the fear of arbitrary dismissal, to allow collaborators to channel their energies toward external cooperation and innovation. Such an undertaking requires a sacrifice of self-interest in favor of collective well-being, in line with the anthropological imperative which dictates that true leaders opt to “eat last” to safeguard the entire group. Here, trust is not a result that can be demanded or ordered but rather the natural consequence of feeling safeguarded by the guide who has the behavioral integrity essential to place people’s safety before numerical results (Sinek, 2014).

This is why it is so important for individuals in management to remember that the perks and privileges that come with their position, symbolized by the

"ceramic cup," are for the position only, not for the individual who must remain grounded in a high spirit of service. It has been established that clients can never love a firm unless employees feel loved and protected by their leaders (Harvard DCE, 2024). The long-term stability and sustainability of an organization depend on its ability to regard people as human beings with dignity, not fungible resources. Ethical behavior is also a response to the urgency of the new generations of workers, such as Gen Z, who require openness and consistency of values as non-negotiable criteria for their professional involvement. To summarize, responsible leadership is not just a matter of bureaucratic management, but an educational and social mission, in which ultimate success is not evaluated simply in profit, but in the ability to inspire people to grow and become, in turn, moral guides for the common good (Dames, 2009).

1.3.6 Conclusions: The leader as guardian of trust

Ethical leadership is not about formal status or authority, but the responsibility to care for the human beings entrusted to the organization (Harvard DCE, 2024). The leader is the guardian of trust, whose main task is to maintain and expand the "Circle of Security", eliminating endogenous threats, such as office politics or the fear of arbitrary dismissal, so that collaborators may focus their energies on external cooperation and innovation (Askew, 2022). As the anthropological imperative states, genuine leaders decide to "eat last" to safeguard the whole community and a task such as this demands the sacrifice of self-interest for the good of the collective. Trust, here, is not an outcome to be ordered or demanded, but a natural consequence of feeling safeguarded by guidance that possesses the behavioral integrity to place people's safety before numerical results. It is therefore important that managers are sensitive to the fact that the benefits and privileges of their role, symbolized by the

metaphor of the “ceramic cup” are only attached to the role and not the person, who needs to stay grounded in a strong spirit of service (Sinek, 2014). Long-term stability and viability of an organization depend on its ability to appreciate its employees as human beings with dignity, not as fungible commodities. It is shown that customers will never love a firm unless employees feel loved and protected by their leaders. Ethical activity also responds to the urgent expectations of new generations of workers, who seek openness and value coherence as non-negotiable criteria for their professional commitment (Harvard DCE, 2024). To summarize, responsible leadership is not only bureaucratic management but also an educational and social mission where the ultimate measure of success is not only profit but the ability to inspire individuals to grow and become moral guides for the common good (Sinek, 2014).

CHAPTER 2: SUSTAINABILITY AS A STRATEGIC DRIVER AND THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

The contemporary global environment is characterized by an unparalleled global crisis, prompting enterprises to profoundly reconsider their ontological mission, changing sustainability from a philanthropic option to a strategic driver for long-term survival and competitiveness. The change from a business strategy that only considers maximizing shareholder value to a shared value creation model is a response to the increased expectations of stakeholders, who are increasingly attentive to ethical, environmental and social demands. In this sense the firm is no longer viewed as an isolated entity pursuing profit alone, but rather an integrated social institution whose *raison d'être* is the pursuit of the common good.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda is the turning point in this process, which through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has enabled corporations with a “moral compass” to perform moral inventory of their key activities (Ban Ki-moon, 2015). Sustainability is no longer seen as a static condition, but as a dynamic and multidimensional process, encapsulated in the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) paradigm, which needs the equal integration of economic prosperity, environmental protection and social justice. However, in

an effort to avoid that this shift is reduced to simple “virtue signaling” it is necessary to have a meaningful grounding of values within organizational processes and corporate culture (Tolstoy et al., 2025). In this case, the figure of the leader is vital as a catalyst for change. Sustainable leadership is not simply classic command-and-control management but rather it is a service mission to develop and sustain what Simon Sinek (2014) calls the “Circle of Safety.” It reduces the endogenous threats and values the human capital as a goal and not a number. The leader, therefore, enables collaborators to focus their energies on the innovation and strategic cooperation necessary to address the exogenous challenges of the climate crisis within this protected environment. Profit is thus redefined as the basic “fuel” for a better social mission, ensuring the durability and integrity of the brand, rather than as the ultimate aim.

This chapter seeks to explore how sustainability has become an inseparable part of business strategy and brand equity and the emotional and cognitive skills that leadership needs to control current complexity. Through the analysis of the evolution of the paradigm of sustainability and the review of excellent management practices, we want to show how behavioral integrity and the forward-looking vision of the leader are the necessary conditions to transform the company into a true agent of social transformation (Tolstoy et al., 2025).

2.1 The Evolution of the Sustainability Paradigm

Subchapter 2.1 investigates the development of the sustainability paradigm, from the ecological sensibility to the systemic vision within the framework of government and commercial initiatives. A key milestone in this shift was the 1987 report, “Our Common Future” (Brundtland Report), which formally defined sustainable development as development that meets the requirements of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs. This concept sanctioned the overcoming of a strictly

conservationist vision, giving a dynamic connotation that defines sustainability as a necessary balance between human activity and biological processes on a long time.

The paper discusses the operationalization of this principle by means of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) paradigm that claims the needed interconnectedness and parity between environmental, social and economic elements. This paradigm indicates that an organization cannot be really sustainable if it does not combine the pursuit of profit with caring for people and the earth (Myburgh, 2009). The paragraph ends, finally, with an overview of the 2030 Agenda and the linked 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), considered as the universal “moral and strategic compass” to guide institutions and corporations toward a path of resilience and shared prosperity. This theoretical reconstruction is a prerequisite for seeing sustainability not as a static objective, but as a constant process of innovation which requires responsible leadership able to translate ethical ideals into organizational practices geared toward the common good (Sinek, 2014).

2.1.1 Definition of Sustainability and Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainability, although perceived today as a pillar of modernity, has its roots in ancestral belief systems, such as those of the indigenous peoples of North America, which already promoted a symbiotic balance between human activities and long-term biological cycles for the protection of future generations. However, its formalization as a political and academic paradigm at the global level can be traced back to 1987, with the publication of the "Our Common Future" report (known as the Brundtland Report) of the World Commission on Environment and Development. In this paper, sustainable development has been formally defined as progress capable of «meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of

future generations to meet their own», establishing the principle of intergenerational equity as the foundation of global ethics (WCED, 1987).

This milestone marked the beginning of a profound transformation from a solely conservationist view to a systemic and multifaceted one where environment protection is a requirement inseparable from economic development and social fairness. Its current dimension is no longer understood as a static endpoint or a pre-defined aim but as a dynamic process of constant adaptation and invention typically represented by the metaphor of an evolutionary “journey”. This paradigm requires a multilevel approach that considers the interconnection of each human system with the overall health of the planet, understood as the ultimate provider of the systems vital to humanity.

From an ontological perspective, sustainability has a strong normative component that imposes on organized societies the moral obligation to leave the Earth in a condition equal to or better than that inherited. Sustainable action therefore implies a "practical wisdom" (phronesis) that allows us to balance the instrumental needs of the company with the responsibility of safeguarding the well-being of all stakeholders and the natural environment. The implementation of this model depends closely on the collective commitment and ability of institutions, both public and private, to translate these ideals into concrete actions, preventing sustainability from being reduced to a mere rhetorical abstraction. In summary, sustainable development today represents a new strategic compass for organizations, imposing a vision in which long-term economic stability is inseparable from the protection of human dignity and ecological resilience (Dames, 2009).

2.1.2 The Three Pillars of Sustainability: The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Model

The implementation of sustainable development in businesses is fundamentally expressed in the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model, a

management paradigm that postulates the required connection and parity between three key dimensions: economic, social and environmental. This paradigm, often characterized in the triangle “3Ps” (People, Planet, Profit), indicates that an organization is not fully sustainable until it equally embraces the pursuit of profit, concern for people and the protection of the planet in its strategy and culture. In this systemic perspective, the performance of an organization cannot be judged only by financial measures, as ecosystem protection and social justice are considered interdependent requirements for economic stability in the long run.

The dynamic between the three pillars implies that leadership is needed to continually steer between objective conflicts between the instrumental goals of short-term profitability and the long-term robustness of the system. Indeed, there is a symbiotic relationship between the dimensions: the way in which a corporation manages the natural environment directly impacts the well-being of people and, subsequently, the quality of its human resource. In this setting, the responsible leader is the protector of this equilibrium, seeing profit not as the ultimate purpose of corporate action, but as the “fuel” to power a greater social mission and the blossoming of collaborators. This vision transforms the corporation into an integrated social institution rather than an isolated entity; a commitment to justice and equity becomes a strategic driver for brand credibility (Myburgh, 2009).

Finally, the move to the TBL model necessitates that moral principles are not only communicated externally, but are integrated (virtue embeddings) into company processes and culture. The incorporation of People, Planet and Profit demands a “practical wisdom” (phronesis) that enables us to balance economic incentives and ethical imperatives so that the firm is a meaningful agent of change (Tolstoy et al., 2025). Such normative responsibility is the moral duty to leave the Earth in an equal or better condition than it inherited so that current

progress is not at the expense of the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

2.1.3 The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: The global framework as a compass for strategic innovation

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, signed in September 2015 by the governments of 193 United Nations member states, represents the definitive turning point in global sustainability governance (Calazans et al., 2025). Defined by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as a «promise of leaders to all people everywhere», the Agenda is divided into 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 specific targets (targets), configuring itself as a universal plan of action for people, the planet and prosperity (Ban Ki-moon, 2015). Unlike previous Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs enshrine the overcoming of a compartmentalized vision of development, imposing an integrated approach that equally involves governments, civil society and the sector.

In the contemporary business landscape, SDGs have ceased to be considered mere peripheral philanthropic obligations and have become a "moral compass" and strategic essential to the brand's long-term survival. Multinational corporations (MNEs) are now incentivized to conduct true "moral inventories" of their operational activities to remain relevant in a globalized market increasingly sensitive to ethical values. Organizations play an intermediary role between the increasing consumer demand for sustainability and global supply chains, and can be "sustainability brokers" or "ethical pioneers" with the capacity to shape local behaviors, even when national institutions are weak. Embedding SDGs into core operations such as fighting climate change (SDG 13) or managing water responsibly (SDG 6) becomes an innovation driver that redefines brand equity and identity. For SDGs to be a real driver of strategic

innovation, corporate leadership needs to shift from “virtue signaling” (outward signaling of virtue for reputational purposes) to real “virtue embedding” (rooting of values) into organizational processes and corporate culture . This promise demands a future-oriented perspective that is capable of addressing target conflicts, balancing economic profitability with stakeholder well-being, and ecological resilience. The responsible CEO is a steward of a “corporate purpose” that is broader than profit maximization, understanding the latter not as the final objective, but as the “fuel” needed to feed a higher social mission (Tolstoy et al., 2025).

Such a transformation also demands the development of a “practical wisdom” (phronesis), that is, the ability to combine moral considerations with the instrumental needs of the firm. Here, ethical leadership is evidenced in the development of a “Circle of Safety” that extends beyond the company walls to include the entire community: by removing endogenous threats and valuing trust, the leader empowers employees to focus their efforts for the innovation needed to solve global challenges. The 2030 Agenda provides the institutional context for businesses to transition from isolated entities to integrated social institutions, where ethical action for the common good becomes the fundamental prerequisite for sustained stability and growth (Dames, 2009).

2.2 Sustainability and Enterprise Value: From CSR to Strategy

This chapter describes the evolutionary route of sustainability from a peripheral and reactive concern to one of the core pillars of strategic management and corporate corporate governance. The integration of socio-environmental issues in corporate architecture reinterprets the notion of business value, going beyond the short-term perspective and the simple maximizing of financial returns for shareholders. The theoretical and empirical itinerary unfolds along three main lines: the evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) from

philanthropy to the creation of shared value embedded in the core business (2.2.1); the reconfiguration of competitive advantage and corporate risk management in the face of the global climate crisis (2.2.2); the adoption of metric architectures, transparent and binding ESG indicators and reporting standards to guide strategic decisions (2.2.3).

2.2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Historical Evolution and Transition from Pure Philanthropy to Core Business Integration

The theoretical and operational evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) represents one of the most profound transformations in strategic management and corporate governance in recent decades. The conceptual origins of corporate social responsibility may be traced back to the early days of the Industrial Revolution. The rise of huge businesses brought the issue of the need to take account of the welfare of the workers and the community context in which they operated. The first academic formalization of the concept, however, emerged in the first half of the twentieth century with the contributions of Chester Barnard and JM Clark, culminating in 1953 with the key work of Howard Bowen . Bowen defined the social responsibility of businessmen as the obligation to pursue those policies, make those decisions, and follow those courses of action that are desirable in terms of the goals and values recognized by society (Bowen, 1953). In its embryonic stages, CSR was conceived and applied predominantly according to a philanthropic and paternalistic logic, that is, as a set of discretionary acts of benevolence disconnected from the characteristic management of a company, aimed at distributing a share of the profits generated to mitigate negative externalities or finance local initiatives.

During the 1970s, this philanthropic and extrinsic conception was the subject of a famous criticism by neoclassical economic doctrine, whose greatest exponent, Milton Friedman, argued that the sole social responsibility of the

company consisted in increasing its profits within the rules of the economic and regulatory game (Friedman, 1970). From Friedman's perspective, any allocation of corporate resources to social purposes without a direct economic return represented an agency problem and improper taxation imposed on shareholders. This vision, closely focused on maximizing shareholder value (shareholder primacy), has been progressively superseded by the emergence of the Stakeholder Theory formulated by Edward Freeman and the integrated models of CSR, among which the pyramid developed by Archie Carroll stands out. Carroll theorized that total corporate responsibility includes four hierarchical and interdependent levels: economic and legal responsibilities, which form the essential basis of corporate operations, and ethical and discretionary or philanthropic responsibilities, responses to the changing expectations of the community (Carroll, 1979).

The decisive paradigmatic shift towards contemporaneity occurred when the economic-business literature began to clearly distinguish between ethical-altruistic CSR and strategic CSR. In particular, the contributions of Michael Porter and Mark Kramer developed the notion of Creating Shared Value (CSV), showing how the company's competitiveness and the prosperity of the surrounding community are tightly interdependent. Shared value goes beyond the redistributive view of philanthropy to address business opportunities that seek to address social and environmental issues by rethinking products, market, productivity of value chain and developing local industrial districts (Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011). By integrating with the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV), CSR ceases to be understood as a bureaucratic cost or fulfillment and becomes a strategic investment capable of generating critical intangible resources, reputation, and defensible competitive advantages.

On the application level, the integration of sustainability into the core business is reflected in international and Italian business models that have restructured

their strategic and legal architecture around this priority. A case of global relevance is represented by Patagonia, a leading outdoor apparel company that has transformed environmental protection into the backbone of its business model and governance. Patagonia, a Benefit Corporation, was later restructured to transfer ownership to a trust and fund to protect the biosphere. All other revenue is spent for environmental projects (World Economic Forum, 2023). The Worn Wear circular program provides incentives for consumers to mend and reuse garments instead of replacing them, with 87% of materials utilized made from recycled sources and 100% of cotton being certified organic. This strategic integration takes place across the value chain, reducing the ecological footprint and creating brand loyalty that has doubled revenues within a decade to nearly \$1 billion (Patagonia, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023).

The Davines Group is a benchmark of excellence in the Italian industrial environment in the field of advanced professional cosmetics (Davines Group, 2022). Davines is a Certified B Corp, a legally constituted Benefit Company, and has established an approach that is based on regenerative sustainability, rather than only the reduction of environmental damage. The company has partnered with the Rodale Institute to establish the European Regenerative Organic Center (EROC) in Parma, a 17 hectare research facility focused on regenerative organic agriculture to develop active botanical ingredients grown without the use of synthetic pesticides, increasing biodiversity and carbon sequestration in soils. The integration into the core business is also shown in the systematic adoption of eco-design for packaging, the priority use of recycled or bio-based plastics and the application of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) analyzes to the majority of items in the catalog (Davines Group, 2022).

Similarly, in the research and capital-intensive biopharmaceutical sector, Chiesi Farmaceutici is the first global pharmaceutical company to have adopted the legal qualification of Benefit Company (in Italy and the United States) and to

have obtained B Corp certification at the group level. Four shared benefit objectives have been explicitly incorporated in the business constitution through the corporate governance, which combine income targets with a commitment to patient health, carbon neutrality, worker well-being and the development of the areas in which it operates (Chiesi Farmaceutici, 2024). This strategic orientation led the Group to allocate over €350 million in a five-year investment plan for the research and development of asthma spray inhalers (pMDIs) based on innovative, near zero-impact propellants, capable of reducing the indirect carbon footprint of devices by up to 90% (Scope 3) well in advance of European regulatory developments.

2.2.2 Environmental Challenges and Opportunities: How the Climate Crisis Redefines Competitive Advantages and Risk Management

The worsening climate crisis and the progressive degradation of global ecological systems have transformed the environmental variable from an exogenous contextual factor to an endogenous component that determines the survival and strategic positioning of businesses. In the strategic theory field, the formulation of the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) by Stuart Hart helped to understand that sustainable competitive advantage is based on the ability of the organization to manage its interdependencies with the natural environment through three strategic resources: pollution prevention, product stewardship and sustainable development (Hart, 1995). These characteristics involve the development of dynamic internal capabilities that are difficult to imitate by competitors, such as the elimination of waste in the production processes, the integration of ecological criteria in the eco-design phase and the creation of clean technologies aimed at future markets. Strategic management of environmental challenges requires a rigorous distinction between physical risks and transition risks, the integrated assessment of which

is the prerequisite for organizational resilience. Physical hazards include both acute and extreme weather events such as floods, droughts and hurricanes, and long-term chronic alterations in climate parameters and natural capital such as rising temperatures, soil aridity and biodiversity loss. These phenomena cause immediate disruptions to supply chains, damage to material assets, and devaluation of production factors, increasing the financial and operational volatility of companies most dependent on ecosystem services. Transition risks, on the other hand, arise from the process of adjustment towards a low-carbon economy and include regulatory developments (introduction of carbon taxes, emissions constraints and European regulations), technological discontinuities, market demand reorganisations and reputational damage. Firms that are heavily dependent on natural capital or characterized by high carbon intensity incur significantly higher financing costs on both the debt and equity markets, as investors and creditors demand higher risk premiums to offset regulatory and management uncertainty. A short-sighted managerial approach risks leading companies to postpone mitigation actions and to favor anti-climate defensive or lobbying strategies, triggering a vicious cycle that aggravates their systemic vulnerability in the long term (TCFD, 2017).

To take advantage of the market opportunities of the ecological transition and redefine competitive advantages, firms need a deep transformation of leadership paradigms, organizational culture and human capital management techniques. The Green Transformational Leadership (GTL) construct refers to the ability of company leaders to communicate a compelling ecological vision, pushing people to go above basic environmental criteria and driving sustainable innovation at all levels of the firm. Green transformational leadership is a facilitator of Green Absorptive Capacity (GAC) which is the enterprise's capacity to recognize, integrate and exploit external ecological knowledge to create operational and product innovation. At the same time,

Avery and Bergsteiner's Sustainable Leadership model puts the stakeholder-oriented approach ("Honeybee approach") based on long-termism, staff valorization, systemic innovation and social and ecological empowerment in juxtaposition with the speculative and extractive approach that is solely focused on short-term profit ("Locust approach"). (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011). The application of these guiding principles in the daily work operations is through the implementation of integrated Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) systems. GHRM trains employees' ecological abilities via specific training programs (Ability), aligns performance evaluation and reward systems with sustainability objectives (Motivation) and creates formalized spaces for participation so that human resources can propose and implement sustainable operational solutions (Opportunity) (San Román-Niaves et al., 2025), analyzed through the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theoretical framework. The interaction effects of GTL and GHRM promote a pro-environmental psychological climate and organizational culture that reduces internal resistance and encourages natural pro-environmental behaviors.

To really govern this transformational journey, it demands the rigorous application of formal Change Management approaches to sustainability. Classic change management approaches, such Kurt Lewin's three-stage model (Unfreeze, Change, Refreeze) and John Kotter's eight-stage sequence, are altered to overcome the rigidity of established routines. Kotter (1995, 2007) in particular emphasizes the importance of building widespread awareness of the climate urgency, forging a strong coalition of leadership cutting across the organization, articulating and communicating a compelling vision of sustainability, and planning short-term wins to build consensus and embed new behaviors in the corporate culture. At the same time, the contingency model developed by Stace and Dunphy helps us to adjust the magnitude of change (from incremental adjustment to radical transformation of business architecture) and the style of leadership (from participatory-consultative to

managerial) depending on the degree of urgency of the environmental emergency and the alignment of internal stakeholders (Dunphy & Stace, 1993).

Bob Doppelt developed a model known as the “Wheel of Change toward Sustainability” from a systems viewpoint. Doppelt states that the most significant intervention to ensure the success of green projects is to restructure the corporate governance structures. Doppelt stresses the necessity to modify the existing mindset, re-organise information flows and rectify the feedback and incentive processes (Doppelt, 2003). This setup is further formalized in the Sustainability Transformation Model (STM) of Ibrahim E. Sancak. STM model is deconstructed and sequentialized the sustainable transformation process, by explicitly integrating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) elements to the individual operational phases. The scientific significance of the STM model is in demonstrating the dominant and ordering role of the Governance (G) factor throughout the process. Environmental (E) and social (S) activities are episodic and not effective in the long run without preliminary adaptation of corporate entities, strategic responsibilities, and control structures (Sancak, 2023).

2.2.3 Measuring Impact: Indicators, ESG Metrics, and Reporting Tools for Corporate Transparency

Integrating sustainability into industrial strategies makes the availability of rigorous architectures for measuring, managing, and reporting non-financial performance essential. Historically, sustainability reporting has developed on a predominantly voluntary basis through a variety of international frameworks aimed at meeting the information needs of different categories of stakeholders. Among the main voluntary standards are the principles promoted by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), characterized by a modular structure based on universal, sectoral and thematic standards and focused on Impact Materiality, i.e. reporting on the significant impacts generated by the organization on the

environment, society and the economy (GRI, 2021). In contrast, the standards developed by the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), now incorporated by the IFRS International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) into IFRS S1 and IFRS S2 principles, adopt the Financial Materiality perspective (SASB, 2021). This approach identifies sectoral ESG metrics that can directly impact cash flows, cost of capital, balance sheet valuations, and business economic value for the priority benefit of investors and financial markets. In parallel, the recommendations of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) set the guidelines for transparency on climate risks, structuring themselves around four pillars of corporate governance: corporate governance, strategy, risk management, and metrics and targets (TCFD, 2017).

In the European context, the fragmentation of voluntary standards has been overcome by a historic regulatory shift represented by the entry into force of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD - EU Directive 2022/2464) and the adoption of the related European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) application principles, developed by EFRAG. The CSRD introduces the legal obligation to apply the principle of Double Materiality (Double Materiality) for a large perimeter of large enterprises and listed SMEs. Dual materiality requires companies to assess and report sustainability by simultaneously analyzing two convergent and interdependent perspectives: impact materiality (inside-out perspective), which concerns the actual or potential impacts, positive or negative, generated by the company and its value chain on people and the environment; and financial materiality (outside-in perspective), which concerns sustainable risks and opportunities that influence or may influence the development, results and financial situation of the company (EFRAG, 2023).

The ESRS standards comprehensively cover 12 thematic areas articulated in the three ESG spheres. The environmental dimension includes five separate

standards dedicated to climate change (ESRS E1), pollution (ESRS E2), water and marine resources (ESRS E3), biodiversity and ecosystems (ESRS E4), and resource use and the circular economy (ESRS E5). The social dimension includes four standards relating to the own workforce (ESRS S1), workers in the value chain (ESRS S2), affected communities (ESRS S3), and consumers and end users (ESRS S4) (EFRAG, 2023). Finally, the governance dimension is governed by the Conduct in Business Standard (ESRS G1) (EFRAG, 2023). The reporting must be placed within a specific section of the management report in the financial statements, audited by independent third parties (first limited and subsequently reasonable assurance) and digitized using XHTML/eXBRL coding to ensure full interoperability and comparability of data in European markets (European Union, 2022).

Besides required reporting, the B Impact Assessment (BIA) is a prominent measuring standard established by B Lab and utilized by B Corps and Benefit Companies to evaluate their overall impact. The BIA scores company performance across five impact categories (governance, workers, community, environment, and consumers) and accreditation needs a score above a minimum level of 80 out of 200 points (B Lab, 2023). The legislative framework introduced by Law 208/2015 in Italy has formalized the figure of the Benefit Company, providing for the legal obligation to attach to the financial statements an annual impact report that takes into account the pursuit of the established common benefit objectives and measures their results using external and transparent evaluation standards. These measurements require advanced analytical tools that can measure supply chain traceability and ecological footprint during the whole product lifecycle to become actionable. Among these, the scientific methodology taken as reference is the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) to quantify the fluxes of matter, energy and emissions related to a product or service from the extraction of raw materials to final disposal or recycling (end-of-life) (Davines Group, 2023; Sarkis & Dou, 2017).

The results of the LCA analyses directly feed into Green Supply Chain Management (GSCM) strategies, guiding responsible sourcing decisions, the selection of less insecure logistics, eco-design optimization, and the reduction of indirect emissions along the supply chain included in Scope 3 of carbon accounting.

Finally, to prevent non-financial measurement from remaining a mere ex-post reporting exercise, advanced organizations integrate socio-environmental KPIs within strategic planning and control systems through the Sustainability Balanced Scorecard (SBSC). The SBSC extends the original directional control model by incorporating sustainability indicators both within the four traditional perspectives (financial, customers, internal processes, learning and growth) and by adding a perspective explicitly dedicated to environmental and social impact. By integrating SBSC with modern digital data analytics technologies, the information and operational requirements imposed by directives such as CSRD are translated into concrete performance objectives assigned to managers of individual business functions, aligning internal incentive systems with sustainable long-term value creation (Figge et al., 2002).

2.3 Leadership for Sustainability: Characteristics and Approaches

The changing global competitive landscape with interrelated socio-environmental crises, market volatility and the tightening of regulations for sustainability and ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting has made traditional directional models inadequate. The shift to sustained socio-ecological development involves a profound restructuring of leadership theories and practices. Sustainability leadership is not merely an extension of corporate social responsibility, but a systemic, ethical and long-term

governance paradigm capable of realigning economic value generation processes with environmental protection and the promotion of social justice.

2.3.1 Definition of Sustainable Leadership: Beyond traditional management towards an ethical and long-term approach

In the business economics literature sustainable leadership is defined as the combination of behaviors, practices and decision-making processes designed to provide lasting shared benefit for all stakeholders, constantly balancing economic performance, responsibility for the environment, and social equality. This paradigm represents the ultimate triumph of the traditional management paradigm built on the idea of shareholder primacy (shareholder primacy) with the focus on maximizing short-term profits and externalizing environmental and social costs (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). In theory, Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) make a distinction between the architecture of sustainable leadership, which they refer to as the Honeybee (industrial bee) method, and the conventional financial-speculative matrix model, which they term the Locust approach. The Locust model is focused on short term profits, autocratic governance and cost reduction at the expense of human capital. The Honeybee model is based on a long term time horizon, the valorization of human resources, systemic innovation and compliance with biosphere constraints to ensure business continuity. At the same time, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) provide conceptual bases that define seven essential criteria of sustainable leadership:

- Depth of Impact: Promotion of real organizational learning and significant socio-environmental value.
- Duration over time: Ability to preserve strategic objectives and ethical vision beyond the permanence or rotation of individual leaders.

- Dissemination of responsibility: Promotion of distributed and participatory leadership throughout the organizational structure.
- Social justice: Ensuring that the organization's success does not harm the surrounding social and ecological context, but actively improves its conditions.
- Promotion of diversity: Enhancement of cultural, cognitive and gender diversity as an enabler of resilience and innovation.
- Resource valorization: Constant development of human capital and material resources while avoiding forms of impoverishment or extractive exploitation.
- Memory preservation: Valuing and reusing past best practices to responsibly build future strategies (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The conceptual framework includes Green Transformational Leadership (GTL). Chen and Chang (2013) developed GTL as a derivation of Bass' transformational leadership about environmental management. GTL is an indicator of the leaders' ability to inspire and motivate staff to exceed the basic standards of ecological compliance, therefore encouraging spontaneous pro-environmental actions and embedding sustainability into the strategic mission of the firm. Transactional management is based on rewards and sanctions in the short term. Sustainable leadership is based on the internalized ethical commitment, which recognizes the intrinsic interdependence of human organizations and natural systems (Varra, 2017).

Analyzing in detail the structural divergences between the two approaches, the contrast between traditional management and sustainable leadership is articulated along six key dimensions:

- Time Horizon: Traditional management focuses management action on the short term and quarterly financial reporting, where sustainable

leadership adopts a long-term intergenerational perspective, aimed at ensuring business survival over decades.

- **Primary Objective:** The traditional model aims exclusively at maximizing shareholder profit (shareholder value), while sustainable leadership pursues the creation of shared value for the broad range of internal and external stakeholders.
- **Governance and Decision-Making:** Conventional management is dominated by a top-down, centralized, autocratic structure; in contrast, sustainable leadership promotes distributed, participatory, and systemic governance systems.
- **Environmental Strategy:** The traditional view of sustainability is as a reactive constraint imposed by regulation and addressed by downstream process interventions (end-of-pipe). Sustainable leadership integrates eco-innovation and environmental regeneration into the heart of the business model.
- **Valorization of Human Capital:** Traditional management considers human capital a cost factor to be minimized, but sustainable leadership sees it as the main strategic resource to be preserved, taught and included in decision-making.
- **Performance Measurement:** The traditional model only considers economic and financial indicators (such as ROI or EBITDA); sustainable leadership assesses business success through the Triple Bottom Line (People, Planet, Profit) and integrated ESG measurements.

The conceptual evolution towards sustainable leadership demonstrates that sustainability does not represent an operational constraint or a mere reputational cost, but rather a reorganizing principle of an ontological and strategic nature (Doppelt, 2003). It requires the transition from extractive and linear logics to circular business models, in which the protection of natural and

human capital becomes the primary condition for corporate profitability and competitiveness in the long term.

2.3.2 The Sustainability-Oriented Leader Profile: Values, systemic vision and ability to influence stakeholders

The sustainability-oriented leader profile is structured along three interconnected fundamental lines: the internalized value matrix, the systemic vision of business processes and the ability to exert a complex relational influence on the stakeholder ecosystem (Chen & Chang, 2013). The founding values of this leadership profile are rooted in the ethics of intergenerational responsibility, altruism, and moral integrity. These value orientations are not only statements of principle, but also actively drive capital allocation and operational decisions in the face of short-term economic-financial trade-offs (Zattoni & Arduino, 2024).

The systems approach is founded on the concept that the firm is an open subsystem that is located within larger socio-ecological systems. From this perspective, the leader applies the theory of Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) to comprehend that a competitive advantage is embedded in strategic competencies of pollution avoidance, product stewardship, and sustainable growth. This way of thinking demands the structural integration of life cycle assessment (LCA) into business plans and expands the directional responsibility beyond the formal boundaries of the firm to embrace the full value chain (Green Supply Chain Management) (Sarkis & Dou, 2017). Through this vision, leadership develops two essential cognitive and organizational skills: Green Absorptive Capacity (GAC), the ability to identify, assimilate, and apply external environmental knowledge, and Green Transformative Capacity (GTC), understood as the ability to encode and retain ecological knowledge in databases and organizational routines (Pacheco et al., 2018).

Governance and integration of these dimensions develop through a continuous logical sequence. Strategic business capabilities are driven by value orientation and systems vision (GAC and GTC). This enables the re-engineering of stakeholder relations through transparent reporting models and evolved corporate structures, such as Benefit Companies and B Corps, which finally translate ethical values into business models oriented to social and ecological regeneration (Davines Group, 2022). The capacity to influence stakeholders is reflected in the transition from transactional management of social actors to long-term relational management (stakeholder engagement). The sustainability leader functions as an institutional catalyst and can develop strategic multi-sector relationships and lead the transformation of corporate governance models (Doppelt, 2003).

The investigation of a number of genuine business findings confirms the empirical validity of this profile:

- Patagonia: Under the guidance of founder Yvon Chouinard, showed how value coherence may define an industrial strategy anchored in environmental advocacy. The structural decision to give away 100% of business ownership to trusts and non-profit organizations (going purpose instead of going public) assures that uninvested revenues are used to tackle the climate catastrophe (Axiom Coaching, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2023)²³. The Worn Wear program, as well as the ten-year membership in the 1% for the Planet network, are examples of the translation of the systems vision into circular economy and emission reduction activities along Scopes 1, 2, and 3 (Patagonia, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023).
- Chiesi Group: A case of transformational leadership in the biopharmaceutical industry. Thanks to the commitment of its family and managerial leadership, the company was transformed into a Benefit Company pursuant to Italian Law 208/2015 and obtained B Corp

recognition globally. This decision has formalized four common benefit objectives in the business statute and led to the strategic investment of 350 million euros for the decarbonization of metered dose inhalers (90% decrease in carbon footprint) and the definition of the Net-Zero target by 2035. Internally, leadership has supported the We ACT (Actively Care for Tomorrow) campaign to get business populations engaged with sustainable goals (Zattoni & Arduino, 2024).

- Davines Group: The Emilian professional cosmetics company has differentiated itself for a strategy focused on “regenerative sustainability” under the president of Davide Bollati. Davines is a Certified B Corp and has designed its packaging according to eco-design principles (refill systems and reduced use of virgin plastic) and has supported, along with the Rodale Institute, the construction of the European Regenerative Organic Center (EROC) in Parma. In this paradigm, leadership considers regenerative agronomic research and biodiversity conservation as intrinsic components of the product innovation and supply chain management process (Davines Group, 2025).

2.3.3 Key Skills: Ecological Mindset, Emotional Intelligence, and Critical Thinking for Managing Complexity

Translating strategic vision into practical outcomes is a combined exercise of three essential macro-skills, the ecological mindset, the emotional and social intelligence, and critical thinking applied to the management of complex systems. The ecological mindset represents the cognitive structure that allows the leader to interpret industrial dynamics in light of the fundamental laws of ecology and climate science. It involves a profound ecological literacy that allows us to identify the impact of production processes on planetary boundaries. The leader equipped with ecological mindset masters eco-design methodologies, production cycle closure models (circular economy) and pollution source prevention principles, surpassing traditional downstream

remediation approaches (end-of-pipe). This expertise allows us to transform stringent environmental regulations into opportunities for product redesign and the efficiency of logistics and production processes.

Emotional and social intelligence constitutes the relational lever suitable for mobilizing the organization and driving the cultural change necessary for sustainability. According to the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory and the Social Information Processing (SIP) theory, leaders have a moderating and amplifying role in Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) systems (San Román-Niaves et al., 2025). The empathetic leader recognizes individual resistance to change, develops a safe Green Psychological Climate, and encourages collaborators to engage in voluntary pro-environmental actions (Employee Sustainable Behavior – ESB). Leadership communicates the ecological vision in an ethically consistent manner, transforming operational limits into meaningful goals, improving employee participation (employee engagement) and decreasing staff rotation rates (turnover) (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Managing complexity through critical thinking is the conceptual ability to examine circumstances of high uncertainty, ambiguity and existence of conflicting agendas. Almost always, sustainability concerns are presented as wicked problems – ones that don't have a single, straightforward answer. The sustainable leader needs to handle paradoxical contradictions, such as balancing current financial profitability with long-term decarbonization efforts, or deciding between cost efficiency and supply chain resilience. This critical thinking enables us to avoid the dangers of greenwashing and management reductionism through rigorous diagnostic tools that examine the second- and third-order repercussions of every business choice on the broader socioeconomic environment. The synergy of these three skills creates a virtuous dynamic: the ecological mindset sets the strategic direction of the company; emotional intelligence activates the levers of the AMO theory for

motivating people and spreading green culture; and, last but not least, critical thinking provides the analytical tools for managing ESG paradoxes and navigating strategic decisions in highly uncertain environments.

To embed sustainable leadership in the business structure, formal change management models are needed to translate values into established routines and to overcome organizational inertia. The scientific literature indicates four primary conceptual application frameworks:

1. **The Stace and Dunphy Contingency Model** The model determines the best method for change by crossing the size of change (Fine-Tuning, Incremental Adjustment, Modular Transformation, Corporate Transformation) with the type of leadership style used (Collaborative, Consultative, Directive, Coercive). In ecological transitions, leaders use collaborative approaches (Participative Evolution or Charismatic Transformation) in case of timescales and broad internal consensus. Yet, in situations of imminent regulatory emergencies or severe environmental crises, the model defends the temporary use of directive styles (Forced Evolution or Dictatorial Transformation) to overcome cultural resistance and to impose binding operational standards (Dunphy & Stace, 1993; Stace & Dunphy, 2001).
2. **Bob Doppelt's "Wheel of Change" Model:** Offers a systemic approach based on seven levers to change the governance of organizations: change the dominant mindset, reorganize sustainability transition teams, redefine corporate goals, restructure rules of engagement (source prevention), realign information flows, correct feedback loops (incentives for ecological innovation) and finally adjust system and measurement parameters (Doppelt, 2003, 2017).
3. **Ibrahim E. Sancak's Sustainability Transformation Model (STM)** Encodes the sustainable transformation journey into eight operational phases. The

STM is connected with ESG variables and is largely driven by the Governance (G) dimension. Empirically, the model shows that in the absence of strong governance (board structuring, incentive systems related to environmental KPIs, transparency), the environmental (E) and social (S) activities tend to stay episodic and without structural influence (Sancak, 2023).

4. Integrating the Classical Lewin and Kotter Models for ESG: The classical models of Lewin (Unlock – Change – Refreeze) and Kotter (8 stages) are rewritten in an ecological key (Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1951). Creating a sense of urgency (Kotter Phase 1) is a matter of scientific evidence on climate change and financial market forces. In step 2, leading coalition building combines multidisciplinary knowledge and cultural anchoring, which in phase 8 formalizes sustainability into internal regulatory and statutory processes (Kotter, 1995).

2.3.4 Leadership Behaviors at Individual Level: Embodied Sustainable Leadership

Special attention should be paid to the actions of individuals, which are the object of study at the micro-organizational level, and to the translation of strategic principles of sustainability and theoretical models of governance into everyday operational processes (Gerard et al., 2017). To believe in the transformational value of sustainability, it should be “embodied” and practically performed by the leader through visible and consistent behavior in everyday work routines. Embodied Sustainable Leadership explains how socio-ecological awareness of the manager transcends an abstract value statement and transforms into a set of internalized operational practices and micro-behaviors.

In the micro-foundational level (micro-foundations of sustainable leadership), the everyday practice of sustainable leadership is built on four basic behavioral pillars:

- **Daily Decision-Making Processes (Daily Decision-Making):** The systematic embedding of the ecological and ethical perspective into routine low-strategic-intensity decisions, such as selecting local suppliers, optimizing the use of resources within offices, managing corporate travel, and the preventive reduction of material waste (Dos Santos & Ahmad, 2020).
- **Ethical Role-Modeling:** The ongoing and prioritized modeling of personal pro-environmental conduct by the leader (Habib et al., 2024). The manager is a normative reference model for the collaborators, legitimizing and making sustainable methods appealing through field examples.
- **Authentic Communication:** The use of a clear, coherent and transparent communication style in terms of business environmental objectives. Authentic communication is the commitment to disclose openly not only the aims attained, but also the obstacles not yet solved, to reveal the complexities and operational paradoxes of the ecological transition without turning to convenient narratives or communication simplifications.
- **Personal Accountability (Personal Accountability):** Direct adoption of responsibility by the leader for the social and ecological repercussions generated by the activities of their team or department, encouraging a culture of self-discipline and assuring the impact achieved (Gerard et al., 2017).

On the relational and behavioral level, the embodied leadership impacts the company social environment, being a facilitating element for employee participation. A key factor in this interaction is the development of psychological

safety (psychological safety) or the shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking and expression of different views. Within the framework of an ecological transition, a psychologically secure climate enables collaborators to report environmental inefficiencies, to question existing practices and to offer creative eco-design solutions without any fear of negative career implications.

This condition of interpersonal trust is cemented with the green empowerment (Weber & Kassab, 2024), a process by which the leader allocates authority, offers cognitive and structural resources and actively motivates people to build sustainable bottom-up (bottom-up) projects. The process is based on the "walk-the-talk" alignment, the total convergence between the leadership's pronouncements of principle and its observable practical conduct. When collaborators experience a perfect fit between the words and deeds of their managers, the risk of organizational cynicism is lowered and an objective process of value identification is set in motion that triggers voluntary pro-environmental behaviors in the workplace (Habib et al., 2024).

2.3.5 Literature Review on Behavioral Frameworks and Detected Gaps

The theoretical treatment of leadership applied to environmental issues has produced, over the last two decades, a multiplicity of behavioral frameworks. Mapping the main existing models highlights several lines of investigation:

- Green Transformational Leadership (GTL): Formulated by Chen and Chang (2013), it focuses on the leader's ability to communicate a challenging ecological vision, promote learning, and motivate followers to exceed minimum environmental compliance requirements.
- Responsible Leadership: Focused on the role of the leader as the pivot of a system of complex relationships with internal and external stakeholders, oriented towards balancing economic value with the common good and social responsibility.

- Ethical Leadership: Focused on displaying normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, as well as promoting such conduct among followers through communication and reinforcement systems.
- Sustainable Leadership: Holistic perspective that analyzes the set of organizational practices aimed at ensuring long-term business continuity, the valorization of human capital and the protection of ecosystems (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011).

Despite the significant contribution made by these theoretical frameworks, the critical review of the scientific literature allows us to identify three significant research gaps (literature gaps), linked in particular to the study of leadership behaviors practiced in daily business operations:

- Dominance of Macro/Meso Analyses and Lack of Micro-Foundation Studies: Most academic contributions have addressed sustainable leadership by focusing on the macro (impacts on group ESG performance, budget reporting) or meso (general organizational climate, corporate culture) levels of analysis, neglecting the empirical investigation conducted on individual behavioral micro-foundations. It remains poorly investigated how managers concretely manage, moment by moment, paradoxes and ordinary decisions in traditional corporate contexts.
- Prevalence of Perceived Cross-Sectional Quantitative Methodologies: The dominant literature largely uses quantitative research based on self-report surveys administered to employees to detect the perceived degree of green leadership. This methodological approach captures aggregate perceptions, but struggles to reconstruct sense processes, real routines, engagement dynamics, and directional micro-practices observable in the field.

- Lack of Evidence on Ordinary Practices in Non-Pioneering Corporate Contexts: Much of the existing qualitative literature focuses on extreme case studies represented by companies natively founded on sustainability (such as Patagonia) or by charismatic leaders linked to non-profit organizations and educational institutions. The practices and behavioral challenges faced daily by managers and managers operating in traditional corporate enterprises or in intermediate stages of ESG transition are significantly less documented.

The identification of these theoretical and methodological gaps constitutes the scientific assumption and justification for the empirical investigation developed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. This research aims to directly explore the micro-practices, decision-making routines, and behavioral dynamics through which business leaders "embody" and manage sustainability in their daily work behaviors.

2.4 Leadership in Action: Tools for Ecological Transition

Integrating sustainability into contemporary business models is not simply a regulatory adjustment, but rather a paradigm shift that redefines innovation and marketing strategies. The ecological transition requires a profound reconfiguration of organizational capabilities, led by leaders capable of translating ethical values into measurable operational practices. From this perspective, leadership is not limited to a mere supervisory role, but becomes the engine of an integrated ecosystem in which eco-design, supply chain optimization, and corporate culture cooperate to generate shared value and competitive advantage in the market (Welch, 2013).

2.4.1 Leadership Strategy for Change: Change management models to promote a green corporate culture

The scientific literature identifies Green Transformational Leadership (GTL) as the critical factor in guiding organizations towards environmental excellence. Derived from the extension of classical transformational leadership principles to ecological conservation, GTL is defined as the set of leader behaviors aimed at inspiring, stimulating, and motivating collaborators to exceed expected levels of environmental performance (Chen & Chang, 2013). Under the leadership of a green transformational leader, the organization develops its Green Organizational Learning Capability (GOLC). The most recent literature divides this capacity into two fundamental components for innovation:

- Green Absorptive Capacity (GAC): The ability to identify, understand, assimilate, and apply external ecological knowledge for commercial and innovative purposes (Pacheco et al., 2018).
- Green Transformative Capacity (GTC): The ability to retain ecological knowledge accumulated within corporate databases and then reactivate it and continuously apply it in internal processes.

Leaders with GTL established research systems to intercept outside sources of ecological knowledge, and so structurally increased the productivity of the green skills of the workforce. This dynamic has a direct impact on the formation of a Green Organizational Culture (GOC) which is a key mediator between the enterprise leadership and sustainability performance (Ismail, 2023). Based on the theorization of Bertels et al. (2010), a sustainability-oriented culture is described as a scenario in which members of an organization have common assumptions and attitudes about the centrality of balancing economic efficiency, social equality, and environmental responsibility.

The study uses Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory and Social

Information Processing (SIP) theory (Habib et al., 2024) to investigate processes by which GTL models employee actions. Leadership impacts the three levers of the AMO model through the incorporation of Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) practices:

1. Skills: Developing green value-based selection processes and ecological training programs to provide workers with technical skills for innovation.
2. By encouraging the internalization of ecological values and linking performance evaluation and reward systems to environmental goals.
3. Opportunities: active involvement of collaborators through democratic and open communication channels, to stimulate spontaneous pro-environmental behavior and to reduce internal resistance.

Within the framework of SIP theory, employees see the signals and behaviors of green transformational leaders as an ethical “North Star,” which leads to the creation of a Green Psychological Climate (GPC) that legitimates and motivates sustainable activities at work (San Román-Niaves et al., 2025). Cultural transformation, however, cannot ignore organized paradigms of change management. Transition is described as a linear process in which the initial status quo is deconstructed (unfreezing), new ecological behaviors are learned and implemented (change), and finally new processes are normalized and internalized within the organization (refreezing) (Lewin, 1951).

This strategy is operationally declined in the eight-stage model of John Kotter frequently utilized to drive the ESG shift. Kotter stresses the need to build a sense of urgency based on an analysis of market and regulatory risks, create a leadership coalition with a high degree of authority and broad cross-functional representation, and establish a clear ecological vision that can be translated into short-term wins (Kotter, 1995, 2007). In the ecological transition, the leading coalition is a driver driven by stakeholder consensus. The leader must be careful not to fall into the frequent trap of prematurely claiming triumph,

misunderstanding a partial milestone with the permanent institutionalization of change (Sancak, 2023).

In periods of high dynamism of the market or in presence of internal cultural barriers, the ecological transition needs adaptable and situational models. Stace and Dunphy's contingency model links the level of organizational change (from incremental fine-tuning of processes to radical transformation of the whole company model) to the leadership style chosen (from collaborative to coercive). In circumstances of great urgency and significant pushback from conservative internal interest groups, the leader may need to resort to "forced evolution" or "dictatorial transformations" tactics to secure regulatory compliance and survival of the corporation. In contrast, when time is prolonged and internal support is high, collaborative and consultative techniques are encouraged that encourage employee empowerment.

Finally, the Sustainability Transformation Model (STM) proposed by Ibrahim Sancak integrates environmental, social and governance (ESG) dimensions within the planned change management. The STM empirically demonstrates that the governance factor (G) dominates the entire ecological transition process. Successful sustainable metamorphosis is highly related to the leader's capability of redefining formal rules and embracing a shared and accessible sustainability language at all levels (TS 12), aligning the corporate strategy with global sustainability standards (TS 17), and fostering transparency and walk the talk ethic among all stakeholders (TS 40) (Sancak, 2023). This systemic perspective is also reflected in the 'wheel of change' (Wheel of Change) of Bob Doppelt who argues that complex decarbonization projects can only be supported when we move beyond mechanistic and autocratic governance toward interdependent governance where power, wealth and information are shared equally (Doppelt, 2003, 2017).

2.4.2 Operational Tools: From eco-design to sustainable supply chain management under the leadership of the leader

The translation of green culture into market-oriented ideas involves the utilization of rigorous operational tools. Theoretically, the operationalization of sustainability is based on the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) of the company, which understands the development of capacities for mitigating the scarcity of natural resources and managing the ecological impact as a source of long-term competitiveness. The ecological shift will demand to go beyond the old reactive “end-of-pipe” waste treatment logics toward proactive solutions focused on pollution prevention, product stewardship (product stewardship) and global sustainable development (Chienwattanasook & Onputtha, 2022).

The first tool available to ecological leaders is Eco-design (ED). It is described as a systematic integration of environmental elements into product design in an effort to reduce its ecological footprint throughout the life cycle . Moreover, eco-design is an essential link between industrial design, materials science and marketing planning, re-designing packaging solutions, reducing the use of virgin plastics from fossil sources, eliminating superfluous components, and optimizing the efficiency of logistics loads per single pallet (Davines Group, 2023, 2025).

To objectively drive eco-design, the leader must impose the usage of the scientific technique of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA). The LCA provides a quantitative mapping of the energy, material and related emissions connected with a product or service from the extraction stages of the raw material to final disposal or reuse. LCA is the central information architecture on which to establish brand green claims, delivering marketing with irrefutable factual facts that protects company image and generates consumer trust (Patagonia, 2024). But the environmental performance of the product cannot avoid the Sustainable Supply Chain Management (GSCM). GSCM spreads ecological control beyond the traditional confines of the firm, integrating environmental

thinking in upstream and downstream logistics activities (Kamra, 2024). It possesses a number of synergistic dimensions:

- **Green Procurement:** Choosing and assessing suppliers according to environmental and social sustainability criteria, which includes adopting international certifications (like ISO 14001) and tracking emissions embedded in raw materials.
- **Green Warehousing and Distribution** Energy efficiency of storage facilities and use of low-carbon logistics systems to reduce emissions of climate change causing gasses from transportation.
- **Reverse Logistics:** The movement of end-of-life materials and products from the consumer to the company for the purpose of recovering economic value through environmentally friendly procedures of reconditioning, recycling or disposal.
- **Customer Cooperation:** Active involvement of the end consumer in an effort to encourage the responsible use of the good and the correct confection at the end of life, so as to activate green value co-creation activities.

The enterprise, under the leadership of the transformational leader, is committed to the ambitious “Five Zeros” model theorized by Lakhal et al. (2007) within the GSCM: zero emissions, zero waste in production processes, zero waste of natural resources, zero use of harmful substances, and zero waste generated throughout the entire product life cycle.

To operationalize these approaches the organization has to build its Collaborative Capability (COC). COC is a key mediating role: trust-based inter-organizational relationships through the exchange of ecological knowledge enable the company and its business partners to overcome the technical barriers of the ecological transition by co-designing circular solutions and jointly improving the environmental and economic performance of the logistics chain (Chienwattanasook & Onputtha, 2022; Kamra, 2024).

2.4.3 Emblematic Cases: Analysis of the literature and excellent business practices

The frontier entrepreneurial models stand for the intersection of ecological leadership theories and the operationalization of technical tools. Empirical research on the practices implemented by sustainability pioneers allows us to emphasize how ethics and social responsibility may become engines of extraordinary solidity, both in financial and reputational terms (Patagonia, 2024). Multinational company Patagonia is the epitome of purpose-driven leadership when it comes to apparel. The company, which was born in the climbing equipment sector, operates in the textile sector which historically accounts for 6.7% of global greenhouse gas emissions and is characterized by the fact that approximately 85% of the garments produced end up in landfill or incineration each year (World Economic Forum, 2023). In a revolutionary ownership structure designed to combat this mining model, Patagonia transferred all voting shares to the Patagonia Purpose Trust, which is responsible for protecting the company's values, and all non-voting shares to the nonprofit Holdfast Collective in 2022. Such governance guarantees that all non-reinvested revenues in operating activities are paid as dividends (around \$100 million a year) to directly fund the preservation of terrestrial ecosystems. The nature of private companies, not being financially indebted, means the leadership is free to pursue long term goals without the profit maximizing pressure of stock market stockholders.

Patagonia's approach is operational and logistical, grounded in rigorous eco-design standards and supply chain responsibilities:

- Material composition and agricultural chain 87% of the products in the catalog are composed of recycled materials and the company only utilizes certified organic cotton. Patagonia partners with the Rodale Institute to support over 1,200 farmers making the switch to regenerative organic

agriculture. The firm declared a goal to eliminate the use of virgin petrochemical sources altogether and starting in 2025, adopted the exclusive use of purposefully added PFAS-free materials on all new models (Patagonia, 2024).

- The Worn Wear Platform and Circularity: The Worn Wear circular economy initiative allows users to mend, resell or recycle unwanted apparel. In 2023, this initiative has allowed to recover 72,000 items of clothing and resale more than 120,000 regenerated items, increasing the average lifespan of the products by around 9 months and reducing the carbon, waste and water footprint by 20-30% for each product (Patagonia, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023).
- Ethical & Internal Alignment: Ethical leadership is represented in the protections for the workforce that is engaged along the global manufacturing chain: 90% of partner factories are Fair Trade certified and 34% of final assembly workers are guaranteed an average living wage (living wage). The company reduces its turnover rate to less than 4% (a remarkably low number for the retail sector) internally by providing extraordinary additional welfare services and funding the Environmental Internship Program, which allows employees to have two months of fully paid leave to engage in environmental activism in the field (Axiom Coaching, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2023).

Patagonia's marketing success comes from remarkable consistency between brand personality and company conduct. The brand equity was reshaped by provocative advertisements against hyper-consumerism, such as the renowned Black Friday billboard "Don't Buy This Jacket" or the political action project "#VoteOurPlanet", which reduced the consumer turnover rate by 40% (Forlani, 2024). This ethical approach has led to exceptional revenue growth, surpassing \$1 billion in 2024, which is four times the revenues of 2014, and provides concrete evidence that radical sustainability can be an accelerant of

economic success (Patagonia, 2024).

Based in Parma, Italy, Davines Group is a global leader in the industry of professional cosmetic and trichological goods. It has been certified B Corp since 2016, with an initial score of 99.3, and has continuous improvement in its socio-environmental performance, receiving multiple international awards in the category "Best for the World - Environment". Since 2005, under the direction of President Davide Bollati and management, the "Ethics Charter" was created, a document of behavioral guidelines produced in conjunction with a philosopher to connect the daily professional activities with the well-being of staff on a personal and relational level. In terms of organizational aspects, the company was ahead of its time by creating the B Corp Strategic Committee in 2015 and appointing Sustainable Development Activators in each company area, horizontal coordination figures with the task of actively promoting ecological innovation in each department (Davines Group, 2023). Davines bases its invention on sophisticated operational methods used across the full logistical chain:

- **Essential Haircare Experimentation Platform** The Essential Haircare product line is designed as the technical platform on which researchers and agronomists work together to evaluate organic ingredients from biodiversity conservation sites. In conjunction with the Rodale Institute, the creation of the European Regenerative Organic Center (EROOC) in Parma, a 17-hectare scientific research and teaching center, has seen the development of this technique since 2022. The EROOC researches regenerative organic farming, which does not use chemically produced pesticides and herbicides but uses crop rotations and cover crops to optimize soil resilience, enhance agricultural biodiversity, and measure the sequestration of atmospheric CO₂ in soil (Davines Group, 2022, 2025).
- **Packaging & circular economy** Eco-design: Davines adopts strict eco-design principles to reduce the weight and complexity of materials used in

its packaging. The development of an innovative refill system (refill) for The Century of Light Progress professional line in 2025 reduced plastic consumption by 92%, total materials used by 48% and increased transport density per single pallet by 47%, resulting in significant savings in transport emissions (Davines Group, 2025). In waste recovery, the partnership with Plastic Bank that started in 2021 enabled 3,436 tons of plastic garbage to be collected and prevented from entering the water in the coastal areas of Indonesia, Brazil and the Philippines. In the same year, the company lowered the share of virgin fossil polymers in its packaging to 37% (Davines Group, 2022).

- Energy Transition and Water Resources More than 59.3% of sales from new products analyzed with LCA, enabling the corporation to evaluate the ecological efficiency of industrial operations. At Davines Group Village, the installation of elevated mobile solar panel agro-photovoltaic systems allows the agricultural activities below, with the aim of producing 100% of the electricity needed for the site in self-sufficiency. In the industrial departments, an innovative closed-loop cooling system is used to reduce water wastage by totally recovering the process water (Davines Group, 2023).

The Chiesi Group is a global, family-owned biopharmaceutical player with a turnover of over €3 billion in 2023 and a staff of over 7,000 international employees. Founded in Parma in 1935, the company represents the first large multinational pharmaceutical company to have adopted the legal form of a Benefit Company (in Italy and the United States in 2018, followed by the status of Société à Mission in France) and to have obtained B Corp certification in 2019, reconfirmed with an incremental score in 2022 (Zattoni & Arduino, 2024). The company bylaws, reformulated in 2020, formally define four common benefit objectives: minimizing the company's environmental impact towards

carbon neutrality; improving patients' health and quality of life; contributing to the social and economic development of local communities; and promoting an inclusive work environment oriented towards individual well-being (Chiesi Farmaceutici, 2024, 2026).

Under the leadership of the Chiesi family, the company has structured its strategic pledge to achieve the Net-Zero goal for all direct and indirect emissions by 2035, advancing substantially in the average deadlines established by the global pharmaceutical industry (Zattoni & Arduino, 2024). The implementation of this plan faces the intrinsic complexity of industrial and healthcare processes, particularly in terms of indirect emissions control:

- **The Reconfiguration of Medical Devices (Spray Inhalers):** The group's main source of climate-altering gas emissions is related to the end-use, by asthma and COPD patients, of prescribed metered-dose spray inhalers (pMDIs), which traditionally contain hydrofluorocarbons with high global warming potential. Chiesi has allocated a five-year investment plan of €350 million for the development of a new generation of ultra-low carbon propellants, capable of ensuring a 90% reduction in inhaler-related emissions, thus anticipating the environmental restrictions envisaged at the European level. In parallel, the circular economy project "Recover and Breathe" has been working for three years to promote the correct disposal and recovery of used devices through the network of local pharmacies (Chiesi Farmaceutici, 2024; Titica, 2024).
- **Green Logistics and Energy Efficiency:** the company aims to convert its entire fleet of company cars to all-electric or hybrid vehicles by 2030, providing support for employees through the Home Charging Project initiative for the installation of home charging stations and ensuring the maintenance of the company's charging infrastructure. For territorial compensation and biodiversity, Chiesi promotes the planting of around 5,000 trees each year (fir and Swiss pine) that may store around 155 tons

of CO2 per year (Chiesi Farmaceutici, 2024).

- **Management of Internal Cultural Change:** The integration of B Corp principles has led to a significant change in operational flows, with variable response times between functional areas. The Global Procurement area was quick to respond, adopting assessment criteria and ecological requirements for supply partners. The Research and Development (R&D) area, however, was in favor of a more gradual transition, balancing the scientific focus on molecular study with the need for environmental protection logic. To address these asymmetries, Chiesi conducts an annual “We ACT Day” (Actively Care for Tomorrow), a comprehensive program of training and mobilization involving the entire workforce, paired with quarterly reporting of environmental and social results alongside the company’s financial performance (Zattoni & Arduino, 2024; Chiesi Farmaceutici, 2026).

The combined analysis of these outstanding case studies clearly highlights how ecological transition strategies cannot ignore a profound synergy between organizational theory and applied tools (Rödl & Partner, 2024). In both the apparel and technology, intensive sectors such as cosmetics and biopharmaceuticals, ethical and transformational leadership acts as the indispensable catalyst for breaking down internal cultural barriers, activating institutional learning channels, and coordinating the value chain toward truly sustainable and regenerative development models.

CHAPTER 3: FINAL ANALYSIS AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

3.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter constitutes the empirical section of the thesis and aims to verify, through the direct experience of managers and business leaders, how the principles of ethical and sustainable leadership discussed in the previous chapters translate into concrete practices in day-to-day management. While Chapter 1 reconstructed the theoretical foundations of leadership, from the classical models to the ethical and value-based approaches, and Chapter 2 examined sustainability as a strategic driver of corporate value creation, the present chapter shifts the level of analysis from the conceptual and organizational plane to the behavioral and experiential one, asking how these

theoretical constructs are actually enacted by those who hold managerial responsibility inside large, structured organizations.

As highlighted in paragraph 2.3.5, the existing literature has focused predominantly on macro- and meso-level analyses: aggregate impacts on ESG performance, survey-based perceptions, and case studies of pioneering sustainability companies such as Patagonia, Davines or Chiesi, discussed in Chapter 2. This body of research, while valuable in demonstrating the strategic relevance of sustainable leadership, tends to leave the micro-level behavioral practices through which sustainable leadership actually manifests itself in everyday operations poorly investigated. Relatively little is known about how leaders operating in less visibly “pioneering” contexts, in ordinary functional roles within large multinational structures, concretely translate ethical and sustainability principles into decisions, trade-offs, and relational practices on a daily basis. This chapter is intended to help fill that gap, adopting an empirical, field-based perspective that complements, rather than replaces, the theoretical framework developed so far.

To this end, the chapter is organized as follows. Section 3.2 presents the research methodology, illustrating the rationale behind the choice of a qualitative approach, the design of the interview protocol, and the criteria underlying the selection of the companies and managers involved. Section 3.3 reports the results of the interviews, organized around five thematic cores consistent with the theoretical framework developed in Chapters 1 and 2. Section 3.4 is devoted specifically to a discussion of the empirical results, highlighting, with the support of a summary table, how the findings extend and enrich the literature reviewed in the previous chapters. Finally, Section 3.5 draws the general conclusions of the thesis, relating the empirical evidence to the broader theoretical and practical implications of sustainable leadership.

3.2 Research Methodology and Sample Selection

To address this cognitive objective, the research adopts a qualitative approach, considered more suitable than a quantitative design for at least three reasons. First, the object of investigation, the daily behavioral practices of leaders, is by its nature difficult to reduce to standardized numerical variables, requiring tools capable of grasping meanings, subjective experiences, and contextual dynamics. Second, the exploratory nature of the research, aimed at bridging a gap that is still poorly structured in the literature, lends itself better to an inductive approach, capable of bringing out themes that are not necessarily foreseen a priori. Finally, the descriptive richness typical of qualitative methods allows the complexity of real decision-making processes to be conveyed, overcoming the limitations of the aggregate, perceptual findings that characterize much of the existing literature on the topic.

Consistent with these premises, data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, carried out personally by the author with managers and leaders operating in large companies. The choice of the semi-structured interview allowed a comparison between the different cases thanks to a common set of questions, organized into six thematic areas consistent with the theoretical framework of the previous chapters: personal conception of sustainable leadership, daily decision-making practices, personal coherence and communication, empowerment and team climate, management of dilemmas and obstacles, and responsibility and long-term vision, while still leaving room for spontaneous insights. For the purposes of presenting the results, the six areas were subsequently merged into five thematic cores (Sections 3.3.1–3.3.5). A number of questions were formulated using the critical incident technique, inviting interviewees to recount concrete episodes rather than express abstract assessments, precisely in order to bring out effective practices rather than mere declarations of principle.

Sample selection criteria: since the research follows a qualitative, exploratory logic, the sample was not built to be statistically representative, but was defined

according to a purposive (or theoretical) sampling strategy, aimed at selecting information-rich cases capable of illuminating the phenomenon under investigation in depth. Four criteria guided the choice of the companies and managers involved.

Organizational maturity: both companies are large, structured multinational or international groups in which sustainability has already been formalized into governance mechanisms (certified management systems, ESG policies, brand-level or group-level sustainability commitments), so that the interviewees could speak to lived, institutionalized practice rather than to embryonic or purely declaratory initiatives.

Sectoral and functional heterogeneity: the two profiles operate in markedly different industries and functional areas, high-performance sportswear and apparel, on one side, and food supply chain and logistics, on the other, so as to observe how sustainable leadership is enacted across different operational “grammars”: one closer to brand equity, product design and consumer-facing decisions, discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 in relation to eco-design and Green Supply Chain Management; the other closer to hard operational trade-offs concerning transport modes, cost structures, and workforce coordination. This heterogeneity increases the analytical, rather than statistical, generalizability of the findings, allowing recurring patterns to be distinguished from sector-specific contingencies.

Decisional relevance of the role: both interviewees hold managerial positions with direct responsibility over a significant number of collaborators and over decisions with material economic and environmental consequences, ensuring that the accounts collected reflect genuine strategic-level dilemmas rather than purely operational execution.

Accessibility: willingness to engage in an in-depth, personally conducted interview was a necessary practical condition, given the confidentiality constraints described below.

Taken together, these criteria are consistent with the logic of theoretical sampling typical of qualitative research, whose objective is not to generalize findings to a population, but to build analytical depth around a phenomenon, sustainable leadership as it is practiced, still under-examined by the literature reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Table 3.1 – Anonymized profile of the interviewed managers

Code	Sector / Industry	Company profile	Role and scope of responsibility
Y	High-performance sportswear and apparel	Italian multinational group encompassing several historic brands, with a manufacturing legacy dating back to the mid-19th century	Marketing and Brand Management
X	Food industry (global food group)	Large multinational food group	Logistics at European-level responsibility; direct coordination of approximately 350 people

For reasons of confidentiality and to encourage the utmost sincerity of the responses, the managers involved and their respective companies, although in several cases they are entities of national or international relevance in their respective sectors, are not identified by name, but are indicated through the fictitious codes X and Y, accompanied only by the contextual information relevant to the analysis (sector, company size, role held), summarized in Table 3.1. This choice does not compromise the analytical validity of the work, since the objective is not the comparative evaluation of individual organizations, but

rather the identification of recurring behavioral patterns in the daily exercise of sustainable leadership.

3.3 Interview Results: Sustainability Experienced in Everyday Managerial Leadership

The analysis of empirical evidence collected through semi-structured interviews with senior figures in company management allows us to verify how the theoretical models analyzed in the previous chapters find application in organizational practice. To ensure a composite and multilevel vision, the research involved two management profiles operating in different sectors and organizational structures, whose anonymized characteristics are summarized in Table 3.1 (Section 3.2): manager Y, engaged in marketing and brand management within an Italian multinational company encompassing several historic sportswear brands, and manager X, responsible for Logistics at European level within a global food group, directly coordinating approximately 350 people.

From the intersection of the testimonies, it clearly emerges that sustainability no longer represents an abstract construct or a mere formal fulfillment confined to ESG/CSR functions, but rather a guiding criterion for cross-cutting decision-making, capable of reorienting the very exercise of leadership and redirecting daily strategic and management vectors.

3.3.1 The conception of sustainable leadership: Operational integration and temporal continuity

A first founding element lies in the redefinition of the concept of leadership. Both managers reject the vision of sustainability as an "additional module" or separate activity from day-to-day operations. Specifically, Y places

sustainability within a horizon of temporal and historical continuity. In a business context characterized by centuries-old brands whose manufacturing legacy dates back to the mid-1800s, sustainability is configured as the natural extension of managerial responsibility towards the future of the organization:

« I don't consider sustainability as a separate activity from day-to-day management...Leadership means above all taking responsibility for the consequences of one's decisions [...] A company that wants to exist for another 50 or 80 years must necessarily make decisions that do not only maximize the result of a quarter.»

For its part, X approaches the topic from a systemic perspective of people management and organizational climate, highlighting how the effectiveness of a leader is inextricably linked to his ability to create a relationally and ecologically sustainable work ecosystem:

« To date, you cannot be a leader unless you create an environment where people are able to communicate with each other, thus creating a sustainable climate within the team.»

Both perspectives confirm the hypothesis that sustainable leadership is not a discipline in itself, but a true mental and procedural posture in the decision-making process.

3.3.2 Daily practices and management of economic and environmental trade-offs

In operational management, the traditional trade-off dilemmas between immediate profit and long-term socio-environmental impact emerge clearly (analyzed in Paragraph 2.3). In X-driven Supply Chain and Logistics processes, tension is clearly manifested in the choice of freight transport modes. The shift in distribution volumes from road to rail transport frequently leads to an

increase in direct economic costs, while ensuring a substantial reduction in carbon emissions. As highlighted by the manager:

« A recent example is related to the decision to use rail transport instead of road, even though it is not economically advantageous but has a significant positive environmental impact.»

X stresses the need to manage these dilemmas with a view to overall annual balancing. There are circumstances where pressing business priorities dictate short-term choices, but the goal of the sustainable leader is to ensure that the summary of end-of-service data balances the four key priorities: service, consistent cost, performing team, and sustainability. In the Clothing and Marketing sector, Y identifies dilemmas in both everyday micro-choices (reuse of samples, optimization of trips, rational management of promotional materials) and structural product choices. The high-end sports sector imposes an essential constraint: the technical performance of the garment cannot be compromised by the introduction of recycled materials or low-impact processes. True sustainable innovation consists in overcoming the logic of mere purchase cost to evaluate the overall durability of the product life cycle (LCA):

«Sustainability cannot be assessed solely through the question "how much does it cost?" We also have to ask ourselves how long it lasts, what resources it uses, what risks it creates, what value it generates in the long run [...] I don't consider sustainability a blank check. The company must remain economically healthy. The real challenge is to find the point where people, planet and profit are not considered conflicting targets, but parts of the same system.»

3.3.3 Personal consistency (Role-Modeling) and communication transparency

The authority of the sustainable leader is based on the coherence between declared and acted (walk the talk), an essential element for building trust within work teams. Both managers highlight how managerial credibility is constantly tested by the alignment between the principles set out by the organization and the practical decisions made on a daily basis. X emphasizes that the emergence of mismatches or conflicts between operational targets and sustainability principles is a daily phenomenon; the leader's task is to explain these constraints and actively seek a credible synthesis. Y articulates personal coherence both in terms of directly applied environmental practices (reduction of superfluous travel, rationalization in the use of resources) and in terms of deep respect for one's collaborators (empowerment, time protection and work-life balance). When a collaborator detects a gap between the company narrative and operational practices, event management must leverage transparency rather than defensiveness:

«I don't think a company should try to look perfect. I prefer to recognize that there is a distance between the goal and reality when this distance exists [...] If a collaborator pointed out a contradiction to me, I would first try to listen to him and understand if the problem is real [...] I don't think it's helpful to defend the decision simply because the company has a sustainability policy. Rather, one must ask: did we make a mistake? Can we do otherwise?»

This approach reflects the dynamic nature of sustainability as a path to continuous improvement, well formalized by the system certifications adopted by companies (such as the integrated systems ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and ISO 45001 recalled by company Y).

3.3.4 Organizational Climate, Psychological Safety, and Green Empowerment

Continuing what is discussed in Chapter 1 regarding psychological safety and the "Circle of Safety", the interviews confirm that the ability of collaborators to promote sustainable solutions depends strictly on the atmosphere of trust established by the leaders. X formalizes this concept by referring to the need to structure a "No Blame Culture" (culture of non-blame). In an organizational context where tasks become more complex due to environmental concerns, people must feel free to express themselves, propose alternatives, and even make evaluative errors without fear of retaliation or judgment. Y conceptualizes empowerment as a real transfer of responsibility and decision-making autonomy, proportionate to the level of risk of the action: Low-risk/reversible decisions: Ample scope for autonomous experimentation granted to collaborators. High-risk decisions (economic, legal, reputational): Need for joint monitoring and closer governance. To facilitate bottom-up (bottom-up) initiative, Y identifies four behavioral pillars for the leader: accepting that he or she isn't always right, and creating a space where the expression of divergent opinions isn't perceived as a personal attack. Ensure motivational transparency and clearly explain the reasons behind decisions, especially when collaborators' proposals are not accepted. Provide context and information as decision-making autonomy requires the collaborator to be equipped with all strategic and operational keys to understanding. The manager's admission of his or her mistakes is essential to legitimizing vulnerability and building the team's true psychological safety.

3.3.5 Generational dynamics and future leadership prospects

The comparative analysis highlights an interesting generational convergence with respect to the collaborators' expectations. Both X and Y detect a marked evolution in the sensitivities of younger resources during recruitment and placement. X highlights how, during selection interviews, younger candidates

spontaneously and explicitly ask questions regarding environmental sustainability and business ethics objectives. Similarly, Y notes in junior profiles a strong demand for consistency between the values declared in the brand purpose and their effective impact on the supply chain and worker protection. However, rather than polarizing generational confrontation, sustainable leadership aims to integrate viewpoints:

Junior perspective	Senior perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong value drive - High ESG sensitivity - Questioning the status quo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operational pragmatism - Management of economic and temporal constraints - Knowledge of processes

Looking ahead to future developments, both managers agree that sustainable leadership will face its most complex test during phases of economic contraction or difficulty. The real challenge will be to avoid backsliding from socio-environmental policies adopted if operating margins narrow, but rather to use sustainability, driven by process innovation, circular design, and supply chain traceability, as the primary driver of resilience and long-term competitive advantage.

3.4 Empirical Results and Contribution to the Literature

This section is dedicated specifically to the results of the empirical analysis and to their relationship with the literature reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2. Rather than repeating the narrative content of Section 3.3, the aim here is to isolate the core empirical findings and to make explicit, point by point, in what sense they extend, qualify, or add granularity to the theoretical constructs discussed earlier in the thesis. Table 3.2 summarizes this mapping.

Table 3.2 – Mapping between the theoretical constructs of Chapters 1–2 and the empirical findings of Chapter 3

Theoretical construct (Chapters 1–2)	Empirical finding (Chapter 3)	Contribution to the literature
Circle of Safety; ethical and servant leadership (Sinek, 2014; Greenleaf, 1970; Brown et al., 2005)	Structuring of a “No Blame Culture”; risk-tiered empowerment (ample autonomy on low-risk/reversible decisions, closer governance on high-risk ones); explicit managerial admission of error as a precondition for psychological safety	Operationalizes the largely conceptual/biological “Circle of Safety” construct into concrete, replicable micro-practices of empowerment and error-management, not specified at this level of granularity in the literature reviewed
Natural Resource-Based View and “wicked problems” in sustainability decision-making (Hart, 1995; Chen & Chang, 2013)	Explicit management of economic-environmental trade-offs (e.g., choosing rail over road transport despite higher direct cost; evaluating products on durability and life-cycle impact rather than purchase price alone)	Provides field-level, decision-by-decision evidence of how NRBV-type trade-off reasoning is actually performed by managers in “ordinary” large companies, complementing a literature dominated by aggregate ESG data and by a small number of pioneering-firm case studies (Patagonia, Davines, Chiesi)
Behavioral integrity and “walk the talk” (Sinek, 2014; Askew, 2022; Brown et al., 2005)	Transparency in openly acknowledging gaps between declared sustainability commitments and operational reality; continuous-improvement	Connects the ethical-leadership literature on behavioral consistency, largely conceptual in Chapter 1, to the operational infrastructure of

Theoretical construct (Chapters 1–2)	Empirical finding (Chapter 3)	Contribution to the literature
	logic formalized through certified management systems (ISO 9001, ISO 14001, ISO 45001)	quality/environmental management systems, an empirical linkage not made explicit in the theoretical chapters
Green Human Resource Management and generational Employee Sustainable Behavior (San Román-Niaves et al., 2025)	Convergence between junior candidates' spontaneous ESG-related questions at the recruitment stage and senior managers' operational pragmatism; sustainable leadership framed as integration, rather than polarization, of generational perspectives	Adds a recruitment- and generational-dynamics dimension to the GHRM/AMO framework discussed in Chapter 2, which had been examined mainly at the level of internal training and reward systems rather than talent attraction

Overall, the empirical analysis does not contradict the theoretical framework developed in Chapters 1 and 2; rather, it corroborates it while adding a level of behavioral granularity that the literature, focused on macro-level performance indicators and on a limited number of high-visibility pioneer companies, had left largely unexplored. In this sense, the main contribution of this chapter to the literature on sustainable leadership lies less in the discovery of entirely new constructs than in the empirical specification of how already-theorized constructs, the Circle of Safety, NRBV-based trade-off management, behavioral integrity, and generational GHRM dynamics, are concretely enacted, on a daily basis, by managers operating outside the small set of companies conventionally studied as sustainability “pioneers.”

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Summary of the Thesis

This thesis set out to investigate how ethical and sustainable leadership, as theorized in the academic literature, is concretely enacted by managers operating within large, structured organizations. The investigation was

developed across three complementary chapters, each addressing a different layer of the research problem.

Chapter 1 reconstructed the theoretical evolution of leadership studies, moving from the classical, trait- and behavior-based models (Great Man Theory, Trait Theory, the Behavioral/Style Approach, Contingency Theories) to the affirmation of value-based and relational approaches, most notably transformational, servant, and ethical leadership. Particular attention was devoted to the biological and relational underpinnings of trust, formalized through Sinek's "Circle of Safety", which links the leader's ability to neutralize internal threats to the collaborative and innovative capacity of the team.

Chapter 2 shifted the focus to sustainability as a strategic driver of corporate value creation, tracing its evolution from the Brundtland Report and the Triple Bottom Line model to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. The chapter examined the progressive transformation of Corporate Social Responsibility from a compliance-oriented, philanthropic activity (Bowen, Friedman) into a source of Creating Shared Value (Porter & Kramer), and reviewed the tools available to measure and manage sustainability performance (GRI, SASB/ISSB, CSRD/ESRS, double materiality, Life Cycle Assessment). It then examined sustainable leadership as a distinct construct, drawing on the Honeybee/Locust typology of Avery and Bergsteiner and on the Natural Resource-Based View of Hart, and illustrated these constructs through the cases of Patagonia, Davines, and Chiesi Group.

Chapter 3 moved from theory to field evidence through a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with two senior managers, coded X and Y, operating respectively in Logistics for a global food group and in Marketing and Brand Management for an Italian multinational sportswear group. The chapter detailed the purposive sampling logic that justified the choice of these two profiles, reported the results of the interviews around five thematic cores,

and, in Section 3.4, mapped the empirical findings against the theoretical constructs discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

4.2 Synthesis of the Empirical Contribution

As detailed in Table 3.2 (Section 3.4), the empirical analysis conducted in Chapter 3 corroborates the theoretical framework developed in the first part of the thesis while adding a level of behavioral granularity largely absent from the existing literature, which remains concentrated on macro-level ESG performance data and on a small number of high-visibility pioneer companies. Four findings stand out as particularly significant. First, the shift from government by authority to the construction of a “Circle of Safety” is empirically confirmed and operationalized through concrete micro-practices: a “No Blame Culture”, empowerment calibrated to the level of risk of the decision, and explicit managerial admission of error as a precondition for psychological safety. Second, the overcoming of economic-environmental trade-offs is shown to be a daily, recurring managerial activity rather than an occasional strategic choice: both interviewees described concrete episodes, such as choosing rail transport over road despite higher direct costs, or evaluating products on durability and life-cycle impact rather than purchase price alone, in which sustainability functioned as a decision-making lens rather than a constraint. Third, behavioral integrity, or “walk the talk”, emerges as the critical success factor separating substantive sustainable leadership from greenwashing or organizational cynicism, and is shown to be anchored, in practice, to the operational infrastructure of certified management systems (ISO 9001, ISO 14001, ISO 45001). Fourth, an intergenerational dimension emerges that had not been fully anticipated by the theoretical framework: both managers report that younger candidates spontaneously raise sustainability-related questions already at the recruitment stage, suggesting that sustainable leadership also

functions as an instrument of talent attraction and employer branding, not only of internal culture management.

Taken together, these findings support the notion, introduced in Chapter 3, of an Embodied Sustainable Leadership: a form of leadership in which ethical and sustainability principles are not merely declared at the strategic or communicative level, but are structurally incorporated into the daily behavioral repertoire of the leader.

4.3 Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this thesis contributes to the literature on sustainable leadership in three main ways. First, it responds to the need, noted in Chapter 2, for research that moves beyond aggregate, survey-based or case-study evidence concentrated on pioneer firms, by providing field-level, decision-by-decision evidence collected from managers operating in “ordinary”, non-pioneer contexts. Second, it establishes an explicit empirical bridge between constructs that the literature has largely treated in isolation, connecting the Circle of Safety and psychological-safety literature to the Natural Resource-Based View’s account of trade-off management, and behavioral-integrity theory to the operational literature on certified quality and environmental management systems. Third, it proposes the notion of Embodied Sustainable Leadership as a way of framing sustainable leadership not as an additional leadership style to be layered onto existing models, but as a behavioral posture that can, in principle, be enacted within any of the leadership styles reviewed in Chapter 1, provided it is anchored in psychological safety, trade-off literacy, and behavioral consistency.

4.4 Managerial and Practical Implications

The findings also carry practical implications for organizations seeking to strengthen sustainable leadership among their managers.

- Building psychological safety as an operational priority: organizations should treat the construction of a “Circle of Safety” not as a soft, optional dimension of leadership development, but as a precondition for sustainability-oriented innovation: risk-tiered empowerment frameworks, of the kind described by manager Y, offer a replicable template for balancing collaborator autonomy with governance requirements.
- Equipping managers with trade-off literacy: rather than presenting sustainability and profitability as inherently conflicting objectives, leadership development programs should train managers to reason explicitly in terms of life-cycle costs, long-term risk, and multi-criteria trade-offs, as illustrated by the transport-mode and product-durability examples reported in Chapter 3.

Anchoring “walk the talk” to formal management systems: the integration of behavioral consistency into certified management systems (ISO 9001, 14001, 45001) suggests a concrete, auditable mechanism through which organizations can reduce the risk of greenwashing and demonstrate the credibility of their sustainability commitments to internal and external stakeholders.

Leveraging sustainability in talent attraction: Given the recruitment-stage relevance of sustainability observed among younger candidates, organizations should consider integrating sustainable leadership practices into employer branding and recruitment communication, not only into internal training and reward systems.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of this research should be acknowledged. First, the empirical evidence is based on a small, purposive sample of two managers; while consistent with the exploratory, qualitative logic of the study, this limits the statistical generalizability of the findings, which should be read as analytically, rather than statistically, generalizable. Second, both interviewees operate within large, structured, multinational organizations already characterized by relatively mature sustainability governance; the findings may not directly extend to small and medium enterprises or to organizations at an earlier stage of sustainability maturity. Third, the data were collected through self-reported accounts of past episodes; the critical incident technique was used to mitigate, but does not eliminate, the risk of retrospective and social-desirability bias. Fourth, the study adopts a cross-sectional design, capturing a snapshot of managerial practice at a single point in time, rather than tracking how sustainable leadership behaviors evolve over the course of a manager's career or across different phases of the business cycle, a limitation made particularly salient by both managers' own observation, reported in Chapter 3, that the real test of sustainable leadership lies in periods of economic contraction.

4.6 Directions for Future Research

Building on these limitations, several avenues for future research can be identified. A first direction would involve extending the sample, both in size and in sectoral and geographical diversity, to test whether the patterns identified here (the Circle of Safety, trade-off literacy, behavioral integrity, and recruitment-stage generational expectations) hold across small and medium enterprises, different national contexts, and industries beyond sportswear and food logistics. A second direction would be to develop and validate a quantitative measurement instrument for Embodied Sustainable Leadership,

capable of testing, on larger samples, the relationships between the four dimensions identified in Table 3.2 and organizational outcomes such as employee retention, innovation, and ESG performance. A third direction, suggested directly by the interviewees' own reflections, would be a longitudinal study following managers and organizations through a period of economic contraction, in order to verify empirically whether sustainable leadership practices are maintained, strengthened, or abandoned under financial pressure. Finally, future research could examine the recruitment- and employer-branding dimension of sustainable leadership in more depth, an aspect that emerged inductively from the interviews but that was not part of the original theoretical framework of Chapters 1 and 2.

4.7 Concluding Remarks

The complex investigative process carried out within this thesis has aimed to systematically analyze the metamorphosis of the role of leadership in the face of the complex socio-environmental challenges of contemporary times. Moving from the historical-theoretical reconstruction of classical models (from Great Man Theory to contingent models) to the affirmation of value-based and transformational approaches (Chapter 1), it has been highlighted how business management can no longer ignore a moral guide, oriented towards the preservation of trust and the well-being of the working community. This paradigm shift has found its natural declination in the integration of sustainability as a strategic corporate driver (Chapter 2): the transition from mere formal compliance towards Creating Shared Value and the adoption of ESG/TBL models requires leaders capable of combining phronesis with systemic skills and long-term vision. The qualitative research conducted in Chapter 3 allowed these theoretical imperatives to be empirically verified, showing how they are concretely internalized and “embodied”, an Embodied

Sustainable Leadership, in the daily management practice of managers and business leaders.

Looking ahead, the evolution of the leader's figure appears no longer as that of a solitary "man of providence" (Great Man) or a cold budget executor, but rather as that of an architect of ecosystems and a custodian of trust relationships. In the face of the mounting demands of new generations (such as Generation Z), the tightening of European transparency regulations (CSRD), and the severity of the climate crisis, sustainability stands out as one of the primary paths available to guarantee business continuity and the social legitimacy of the enterprise.

In conclusion, sustainable leadership, as this thesis has sought to show both theoretically and empirically, ceases to be a specialized declination of management to become one of the central forms of leadership required in the twenty-first century: an educational, social, and moral activity capable of demonstrating that profit is not the ultimate end of economic action, but the fuel necessary to sustain a higher mission of shared prosperity and protection of the planet.

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