



Master's thesis

Master's Program (120 credits) in Strategic Entrepreneurship for International Growth with specialization in Strategic Leadership - SASEI

Holistic Sustainability Leadership

Developing a practical framework towards transformative and holistic sustainability change

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Abstract

Leadership is a key process to achieve sustainable development, as it influences how individuals and organizations respond to complex sustainability (grand) challenges. Although Sustainability Leadership has been developed through various frameworks, many remain either theoretical or siloed, and few have been practically validated. This highlighted the need for a Holistic Sustainability Leadership (HSL) framework that connects the inner aspect of the self from Holistic Leadership with the systems thinking and long-term stewardship of Sustainability Leadership, that is practically validated. To explore and develop this, we applied an abductive research approach going from theory to data and back from data to theory. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in the fields of leadership and sustainability to validate and further refine the framework. The final version of the HSL framework consists of four interconnected aspects: Being, Doing, Developing, and Visioning that show leadership as a process that evolves between the leader and the follower / community. The framework contributes both theoretically and practically by offering a model that supports leadership development, decision-making, and long-term holistic sustainability transformation in complex environments.

Keywords: Holistic Sustainability Leadership, Holistic Leadership, Sustainability Leadership, TBL, Holistic Sustainability, Integrative Sustainability, Conceptual Framework

Preface

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1. Introduction

This chapter will provide an introduction to the thesis before you. First, this introduction will discuss the background to the field research central to our research, namely sustainability in business which would lead to sustainability in leadership. We then, after clarifying the intended interpretations for this research, cover the need for Holistic Sustainability Leadership. After this, we outline the problem area and the research questions addressed in this study. The introduction concludes with the purpose of the study and its delimitation.

1.1 Sustainability in Business

The discussion on sustainability and sustainable development is far from new. Concerns about sustainability and its integration in business have been raised since the mid-20th century. One key moment was at the United Nations General Assembly in 1987 with the publication of Our Common Future by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), where they defined Sustainable development as “to ensure that it [development] meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987), ever since this concept has been widely used by academics and businesses.

Over recent decades, scholars, policymakers, business leaders and societies in general have been debating how we can properly integrate economic, environmental and social priorities, to enable us to create a more just and sustainable future. A future in which we care profoundly for our fellow humans and for the other beings with whom we share this planet, as well as for the resources our earth has provided. This debate has led to changes in business practices, governance and leadership models to achieve systemic and long-term change. For example, when we think about the shift towards circular economy models in the European Union, the design of sustainability reporting frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), and corporate commitments to net-zero emissions have all been responses to these debates. However, these efforts vary significantly across countries, with some nations integrating sustainability into their economies, while others find it hard due to political and economic instability. Moreover, even when some economies “integrate” sustainability, the interconnected relationships they have with other economies suggest this integration is not fully applied (Hartman et al., 1999).

The introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) adopted in September 2015 and put into force in January 2016 (United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda, n.d.) and the Paris Agreement adopted by 196 nations in December 2015 and put into force in November 2016 (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, n.d.), provided organizations and governments with a framework for leaders around the world to tackle these systemic challenges. With clear future scenarios, traceable goals and commitment from many countries, it seemed like, as a society, we were heading towards sustainable development. Yet, while these global frameworks set ambitious targets, their success depends greatly on the ability of organizations and governments to collaborate across sectors and regions.

This led to Goal 17 of the SDG: Partnerships for the Goals, which plays a crucial role in these sustainability efforts. This goal emphasizes that achieving real sustainability requires collaborative, cross-sector partnerships between governments, businesses, civil society, and international organizations. Goal 17 serves as the foundation for integrating and operationalizing sustainability efforts across all domains and achieving true sustainable development.

However, global alignment with these frameworks from the UN and Paris Agreement/UFCC has not guaranteed steady progress: The 2024 Sustainable Development Goals Report highlights that only 17% of SDG targets are on track, with over one-third showing regression (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). The global view on the report shows increasing inequality gaps, especially between developing and developed countries. For the first time this century, the per capita GDP growth in half of the world's most vulnerable countries is slower than wealthier countries, which translates into a reversal in the convergence of income (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). The aftereffects of COVID-19, in addition to current political conflicts, economic instability and climate-related disasters, have deepened these differences. According to the report, another 23 million people were pushed into extreme poverty, and over 100 million more suffered from hunger compared to pre-pandemic levels (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). At the same time, the 2025 European Sustainable Development Report shows that Europe, often seen as a sustainability pusher, is slowing down in its process, even with some reversal in key areas, particularly socio-economic (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2025).

The above issues reflect on what scholars refer to as Grand Challenges – complex, large-scale and interconnected problems that are difficult to define and even harder to solve (George et al., 2016). Climate change, inequality, and environmental degradation are examples of such grand challenges, which require coordinated, cross-sectoral and innovative approaches.

All of these challenges lead to the need for leadership that is capable of navigating that complexity and drive meaningful progress across all pillars of sustainability. Moreover, leaders must not apply sustainability principles randomly but rather develop the ability to bridge gaps between sectors and actors, ensuring that sustainability commitments translate into real-world impact. We also share the view of Eichler (1937): leadership is a dynamic process where individuals take on leadership and followership roles depending on the context. This supports our idea of giving leadership tools to individuals of all levels in order to drive systemic change.

“But someone will object that not all can be leaders; that there must be followers, and that it is quite as important to train good followers as good leaders. With this objection we cannot agree as it is not true that one person is a leader at all times and another person is a follower in all situations. The fact of the matter is that most persons are both leaders and followers. They lead in one situation and follow in another. Therefore, it is important for all persons to know the technique of leadership. -... This is one of the greatest needs of the day – the ability on the part of the mass of our people to select

good leaders for positions of responsibility in present-day social, economic, and political life.” – G. A. Eichler, 1937

1.2 Sustainability in Leadership

In our efforts to define Sustainability in Leadership, we first considered a selection of research publications on sustainability development. We then assess a range of articles that discuss the leadership needed to achieve this.

Sustainability is commonly interpreted as what is commonly known as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) which was coined by Elkington (1994). The TBL consists of Societal Sustainability, Environmental Sustainability, and Economic Sustainability. Sustainability scholars have developed different models to integrate these dimensions into business and governance.

The term of Triple Bottom Line was coined by Elkington (1994), who reflected in his paper “Towards the Sustainable Corporation: Win-win-win business strategies for Sustainable Development” that “win-win-win” strategies simultaneously benefit the company, its customers, and the environment.” (Elkington, 1994). This is now generally framed as “people, planet and profit”. This approach encourages businesses to change their focus from profit-driven to a more holistic approach of value creation. Elkington also reflected on the progression of sustainability awareness and argued that western industrial societies had gone through an “awakening” process over three decades, moving from phases of ignorance, awakening, denial, and guilt reduction, to conversion and integration of sustainability.

Around the same time, Gladwin et al. (1995) debated in their paper about the importance of integrating sustainability. He argued that the development of society had been constrained by exclusive paradigms: “technocentrism”, which emphasizes economic growth and human central views over nature, versus “ecocentrism”, which prioritizes environmental preservation, even over human needs. To replace these constraining exclusive paradigms, Gladwin et al. (1995) propose a new framework “sustaincentrism” that aims to integrate ecological and social concerns within management and organizational studies. This supports the argument that sustainable development is not merely a passing trend but rather a necessary evolution in business, governance and society.

Some scholars also expanded the discussion beyond integrating economic and environmental issues to include a more systemic and multilevel approach. Starik and Rands (1995) introduced the concept of Ecologically Sustainable Organizations (ESOs). They argue that sustainability should be examined through a web of relationships that goes from individuals and organizations to political-economic structures, social-cultural influences, and ecological systems. By using an open system approach, the authors support the idea that businesses do not operate in isolation; instead, they are influenced by external forces, and to succeed, they must relate their strategies with other concerns from ecological and societal sides. By doing so, ecological sustainability requires organizations to consider not only their direct impacts but also how their operations interact with natural capacities and resource limitations.

This perspective reinforces the idea coming from "sustaincentrism" (Gladwin et al., 1995), arguing that sustainability must move beyond balancing economic and ecological concerns towards an integrated, systemic approach that acknowledges interdependencies across levels. For Hartman et al. (1999), the inclusion of leadership in these discussions became critical, as leaders are the ones who shape organizational strategies, encourage and build cross-sector collaborations, and include sustainability principles in decision-making processes.

Hartman et al. (1999) led us to the introduction of leadership into sustainability development and its importance within it. They argue that sustainability challenges were too complex to be solved by a single actor, and the need to shift from traditional "command-and-control" approaches to partnership-based solutions, introducing collaborative leadership as a key factor in advancing sustainable business practices. This changes the view of sustainability as a constraint to business development but leveraging partnerships as a long-term strategy asset to drive innovation and sustainability. Leaders then do not only need to understand sustainability principles but also have the ability to integrate different perspectives and aim for cross-sectoral collaborations. However, more than 25 years after Hartman's contribution, the level of integration is very limited in practice.

From the literature, we therefore encounter two main issues in this field: (1) the need for holistic sustainability leadership, with leaders who are able to tackle "grand challenges" (Sajjad et al., 2024) and (2) the need for leadership skills to navigate and prosper in complex environments through critical thinking (Flores et al., 2012) where contradictory and yet connected issues are part of the day-to-day challenges.

1.3 A need of Holistic Sustainability Leadership

To avoid ambiguity, we begin by defining two key terms used in the thesis:

Leadership can take shape in not only formal leaders, who can be identified by for instance their job titles, but also informal leaders, who have a discrete yet effective influence on their surroundings.

Sustainability is interpreted as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) which consists of Societal Sustainability, Environmental Sustainability, and Economic Sustainability. These three aspects are often siloed and individually considered when it comes to sustainability practices and projects. These thoughts come from different models, which will be discussed in more detail throughout our research.

As mentioned in our background (see 1.1 and 1.2), the increasing urgency of global sustainability challenges has increased the spotlight on how leadership can drive real change in different contexts, from businesses and organizations to governments and society in general. This was addressed by Gladwin et al. (1995) and Hartman et al. (1999). Their approaches to how leaders can drive change in different contexts, however, has remained scattered.

While many leadership models have integrated sustainability principles, very few show empirical validation in real-world practice. As a result, these models remain conceptual (Ferdig, 2007; Sajjad, 2024). This means there is still a gap between theoretical frameworks and how leaders actually navigate sustainability challenges in practice.

In response to this gap, we propose the concept of Holistic Sustainability Leadership (HSL). Contrary to traditional models, that prioritize sustainability issues in isolation, HSL aims to integrate all dimensions of sustainability (environment, social, and economic) in an interconnected and systemic approach into leadership practice.

This study explores the development of HSL and critically examines its potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This research seeks to provide a practical framework for current and future leaders to achieve transformative and holistic change by analyzing the evolution, foundational principles, and possible applications in the real life of HSL.

The next subchapter (1.4) defines the problem area and presents the research questions addressed in this study.

1.4 Problem Area

Organizational sustainability practices are currently ad-hoc and siloed (Lubin and Etsy, 2010). Organizations treat sustainability topics as change management projects, in which there is a focus on one of the three pillars of the TBL. Furthermore, company boards prioritize internal drivers, such as the business case and leadership, and external drivers, such as regulatory and legislative requirements, company reputation, and customer expectations (Lozano, 2013), missing the opportunities for truly transformative change.

In any of those scenarios, sustainability is integrated within an organization by focusing on prioritizing just one of three TBL pillars. This, in turn, leads to an under-prioritization of one or both of the two remaining aspects from the TBL. Furthermore, due to this siloed paradigm towards sustainability, society has failed to understand the complexity inherent in grand challenges, and the leadership capacity required to address them holistically.

This research argues that society needs more holistic sustainability leaders for the future well-being of people, the planet, and the economy. In order to advocate sustainable influences and sustainable business practices, we need to find or create roadmaps for formal leaders or informal leaders to enable them to become holistic sustainability leaders. Existing theory identifies holistic attributes regarding what makes a sustainable leader (Quattro et al., 2007; Armani et al., 2020; Sajjad et al., 2024). However, there is insufficient empirical evidence to validate whether these theoretical frameworks correspond with real-world sustainable leaders.

As the term holistic sustainability leadership is relatively new, we take an exploratory study that aims to clarify this phenomenon. (Saunders et al. 2023) This thesis addresses gaps identified in current research and offers a practical contribution by laying out the implications of and defining a framework for aspiring future holistic sustainability leaders.

This need can be expressed with the support of the following research questions:

- What is the meaning of Holistic Sustainability Leadership?
 - What have been the developments within Holistic and Sustainability Leadership?

- What key attributes mentioned in existing theories fall under Holistic Sustainability Leadership?
- How can we define the ideal Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework?

Based on these research questions, the purpose of this thesis is presented in chapter 1.5.

1.5 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to use an evaluation of current theories in relation to Holistic Sustainability Leadership to create a conceptual framework, for this critical aspect of future leadership models and then to test and improve this conceptual framework in a series of qualitative interviews with expert participants. The conceptual framework will clearly communicate the interconnected implications of Holistic Sustainability Leadership.

1.6 Delimitation

Due to our vision on staying with the holistic interpretation, we did not consider articles that were focussed on just one aspect of sustainability, even if they could perhaps have provided some shared attributes or insights with holistic sustainability theories. With respect to the interviews, the delimitation on the data collection was the purposive and available selection of the interviewees. Important, but understandably restricted selection criteria included the interviewee's background in order to argue the validity of their relevant expertise, being able to speak English at an advanced professional level and, being approached via our personal direct or indirect network.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides thematic-based insights into the theoretical discoveries that link the chronological developments within the field of Holistic Sustainability Leadership. This chapter starts with the exploration of theoretical developments within the field of Holistic Leadership, followed by an exploration of theoretical developments within Sustainability Leadership. These findings are then connected, leading to an overview of the theoretical developments bridging into Holistic Sustainability Leadership. Finally, the chapter closes with a first draft of a conceptual framework linking the most valuable findings. This theoretical foundation is key to fulfilling the purpose of this study, which is to develop and test a conceptual framework that can guide future leadership practices in sustainability.

2.1 Holistic Leadership

When searching for Holistic Leadership in scientific databases (see chapter 3.3), one of the most cited papers published in Litmaps using the key words Holistic Leadership, is “Developing holistic leaders: Four domains for leadership development and practice” by Quattro et al. (2007). This model sets the scene for the topic of Holistic Leadership and provides the foundation for what is currently known about Holistic Leadership

2.1.1. Setting the scene for Holistic Leadership: Quattro et al. 2007

From the four domains of leadership development and practice by Quattro et al., 2007 it is clear from Quattro et al.’s writings that there is a need to renew the scope of leadership. Other influential collaborators, such as Mintzberg (2004), have also called upon a revision of leadership studies and practices (Mintzberg, 2004; Quattro et al., 2007).

The authors of this conceptual paper develop a model in which four different leadership domains are represented: Analytical domain, Conceptual domain, Emotional domain, and Spiritual domain. This model is known as the ACES model of Holistic Leadership (Quattro et al., 2007). When all four domains are present within the leadership style in question, the authors present this as what is to be Holistic Leadership (see figure 1).

The ACES Model of Holistic Leadership

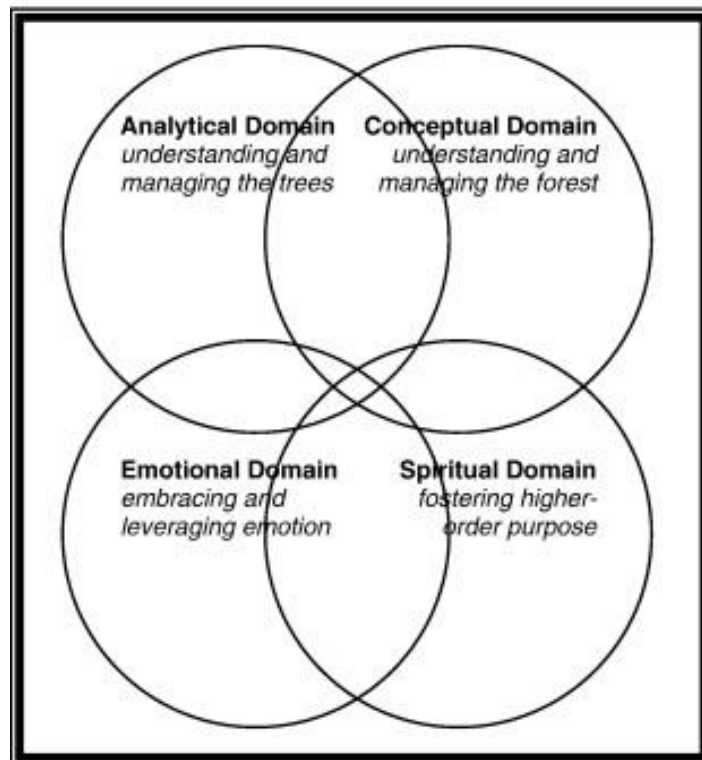


Figure 1 The ACES model of holistic leadership by Quattro et al. (2007)

Predominant domains associated with leadership research have been the analytical and conceptual domains within business administration literature. Notable contributors popularized within leadership and management courses have been Taylorism with Scientific management, and Theory x management style from McGregor.

Although it seems that the Emotional and Spiritual domains are perceived to be more contemporary additions to the field of Leadership, the authors stress the fact that the leadership domains on which the ACES model is based are all longstanding and theoretically grounded research (see table 1). This is keeping in mind that this article by Quattro et al., was published as recently as 2007, merely two decades since publishing this thesis compared to the four to nine decades of research the theoretical and research bases have been investigated for the publishing of the ACES model (Quattro et al., 2007).

Table 1 The Theoretical and Research bases for the ACES model by Quattro et al., 2007	
Leadership Domain	Theoretical and Research bases
Analytical	Scientific management (Taylor, 1911) Theory × management (McGregor, 1960) Agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976)
Conceptual	Cooperative systems (Barnard, 1938) Organizational social psychology-based systems (Katz and Kahn, 1978)

	Systems thinking and organizational learning (Senge, 1990a)
Emotional	Hawthorne studies (Mayo, as described by Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1966) Transformational leadership (Bass, 1985, 1997; Burns, 1978) Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995)
Spiritual	Self-actualization in the workplace (Maslow, 1965) Institutional theology and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) Developing Holistic Leadership: A Program Description (Norris, 1992) Values-based leadership (House and Aditya, 1997) Toward a theory of spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003)

To continue deeper into the less popularized domain, the development of holistic leadership was investigated in a school study back in 1992 by Cynthia J. Norris. Norris aimed to test a pilot program for students to develop themselves holistically to improve their leadership potential, meaning to describe a process which revolves around self-knowledge and personal development combined with theoretical foundations and applying skills (Norris, 1992).

Norris' focus was for the students to understand themselves, in order to be able to then develop themselves further and holistically. For the students to be evaluated and see into their leadership styles, personality traits, and leadership behaviours, these students had to each take the diagnostic tests: Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI); Herrman Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI); Kolb Learning Styles Inventory; Hall Tona Inventory of Values; and Strong Cambell Interest Inventory. After this, the students were also assessed extensively over two days by Metro-Houston Principal Assessment Center (NASSP) on their generic leadership behaviour (Norris, 1992). For this more generic leadership behaviour to be evaluated, the students were evaluated based on four categories: Interpersonal skillsets; Communication skills; Administrative capabilities; and other (Norris, 1992).

The key to this process was initially during the diagnosis phase of the study, for students to become more self-aware: attributes of their individual traits and how variables in their personality thought processes effect their leadership behaviour. Personal reflection, and the deeper reflection of others around them, led to an increase in understanding and appreciation of differences with others, and led to a more personal understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses, or areas in which they could develop more on (Norris, 1992).

Furthermore, in 2003, Fry published in *The Leadership Quarterly* their paper titled "Toward a theory of spiritual leadership" (Fry, 2003). Here the author brings to the table that the purpose of spiritual leadership, with help from the author's intrinsic motivation model, that inclusions

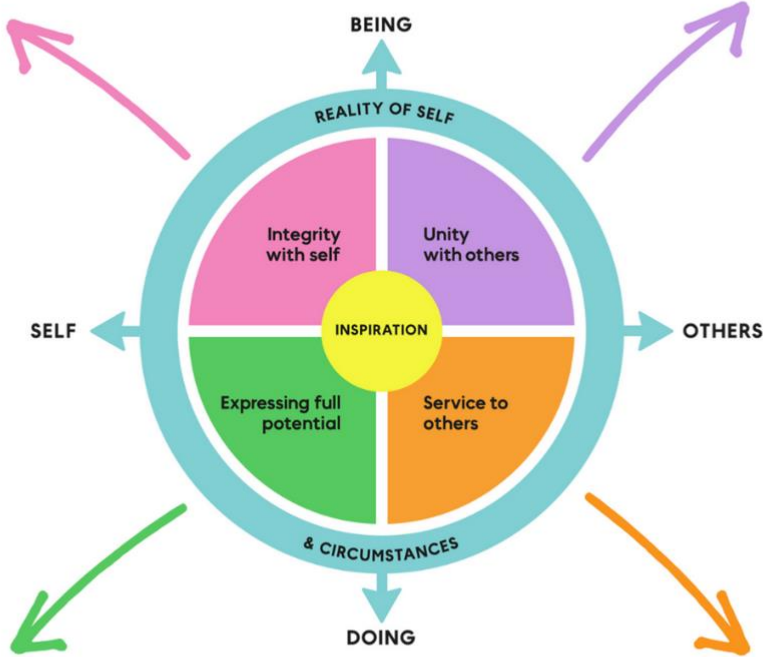
of “vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love, theories of workplace spirituality, and spiritual survival” are collectively the purpose to maintain an increase of organizational commitment and productivity. This is done by letting spiritual leadership create vision and value compatibility across not only the individual levels, but also across the strategic and empowered team (Fry, 2003).

2.1.2 Further contributions after Quattro et al., 2007 on Holistic Leadership

Four years after the publishing of the ACES model of holistic leadership by Quattro et al (2007), Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2011) published “The Map of Meaning: a guide to sustaining our humanity in the world of work”. In this book, the authors developed and tested in multiple contexts the Holistic Development Model (see figure 2) in, amongst others, New Zealand, the UK, and the Netherlands. The authors close their research by inviting future Honours, Masters and PhD students to continue researching their model (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011).

This pathway refers to the meaning we get from living and working in alignment with our authentic self and values. It also includes personal growth and the development of our inner qualities, for example having the confidence to speak up, the wisdom to know when we are overwhelmed, the courage to remain true to ourselves.

This pathway refers to the meaning we get from working and living together with other human beings. It relates to the experience and joy of having a sense of belonging, of working well together and supporting each other, of having shared values and quality relationships.



This pathway refers to the meaningfulness of sounding our own note in the universe. It relates to the human need to create, accomplish, and make things happen through applying our unique gifts, talents, and passions.

This pathway refers to the meaningfulness of making a contribution to the well-being of others and the world around us. It relates for example to helping a friend or a colleague at work, or to making a difference at home, in the workplace, in the community or wider world.

Figure 2 The Map of Meaning: The Holistic Development Model by Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011

Within this Map of Meaning, it is important to see the role of the individual within their environment. Key takeaways from this model on an individual level are to be able to understand oneself, an individual’s potential, personal growth capabilities, what are your values, who you are, and also what the spaces to still develop on are (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011). This field can be explored and further developed with help of what was piloted in 1992 by Norris (1992). When having reached a deeper understanding of yourself, it is then important to look outwards to your environment and the role you play within it. Von Krosigk, (2007) complimented this further by saying that leaders who are emotionally aware, demonstrated authenticity and a care for peaceful processes.

As we discover our identity, authentic self and capabilities, weaknesses and strengths, we can gain a better understanding of how we can coexist with others around us and how we can serve each other by lifting others up. For us to be able to holistically develop, our purpose and role within the various circles of influence needs to be discussed (Covey, 2004).

Covey (2004) determines a need for a paradigm shift in order to change and develop oneself. One of these habits he calls upon is the inside-out approach instead of focusing on outside-in. The importance of this is the shift from being reactive towards what is in your circle of concern, to a more proactive approach from within your circle of influence (see figure 3) (Covey, 2004; Schaffner, 2023).

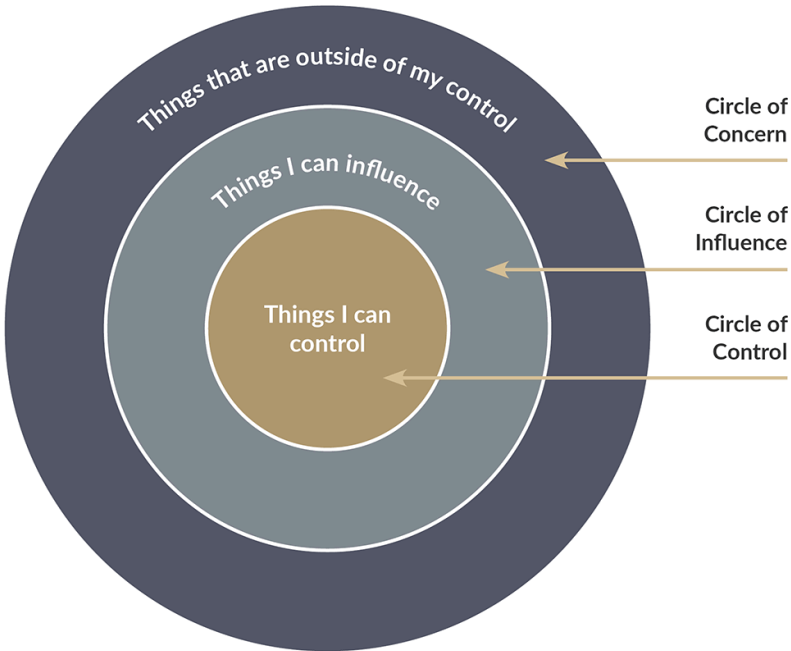


Figure 3 "Understanding the Circles of Control, Influence and Concern", Anna Katharina Schaffner, Ph.D. (2023)

In even more recent published works, Sendjaya et al. (2019) referred to Quattro et al.’s research in their research titled “SLBS-6: Validation of a Short Form of the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale” (Sendjaya et al., 2019). Here the authors stress the importance of including spirituality and a holistic perspective on servant leadership, which is the case in the Servant

Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS-6). The purpose of their study was to discover whether SLBS-6 instead of SLBS-35 (6 items instead of 35 items measure) was a valid method of testing and measuring holistically servant leadership. The six items would represent the following six dimensions, making servant leadership more holistic: *voluntary subordination*; *authentic self*; *covenantal relationship*; *responsible morality*; *transcendental spirituality*; and sixth, *transforming influence*. This conceptual understanding is valuable because servant leadership is an approach of holistic leadership in which servant leadership holistically “engages the rational, relational, ethical, emotional, and spiritual aspects” (Sendjaya et al., 2019) of followers as well as formal and informal leaders to be able to transform themselves into their full potential, and what they are capable of (Sendjaya et al., 2019; Von Krosigk, B. 2007).

The link from Holistic Leadership to Sustainability Leadership leads to the discovery of an interesting supporting article by Nicholson and Kurucz (2019). The authors of the paper “Relational Leadership for Sustainability: Building an Ethical Framework from the Moral Theory of ‘Ethics of Care’” (Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019) empirically tested and validated their model after receiving feedback, provide the contributions of relational leadership and the need of ethical dimensions within our next discussion: the development of Sustainability Leadership.

2.1.3. Conclusion: Holistic Leadership

Where traditionally leadership was seen as predominantly conceptual and analytical, more and yet under cited research contributes to the field of holistic leadership research with inputs of spiritual and ethical development; altruism; unity with others; emotional intelligence and development; relational development; flexibility and harmony; authenticity; self-awareness; rational development and personal growth; and servant leadership (Norris, 1992; Fry, 2003; Von Krosigk, B. 2007; Quattro et al., 2007; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019). This can now be connected to the major area of Holistic Leadership to consider in this thesis, which is the deeper connections within domains of emotional (intelligence), spiritual leadership, and servant leadership, while having analytical and conceptual capabilities.

And so, following up on the ACES model of Holistic Leadership (Quattro et al., 2007) the key takeaways from these findings on Holistic Leadership, and in order to understand the bigger picture moving forward, are: within the analytical domain, it’s important to understand and manage the components that are controllable; within the conceptual domain, it’s important to understand and manage that which you can influence; within the emotional domain, it’s important to embrace one’s full capacity and leverage emotional and personal development and growth; within the spiritual domain, it’s important to foster and lift up ethically all that is interconnected within areas within our control, influence and beyond into the circle of concern.

2.2 Sustainability Leadership

When talking about Sustainability Leadership, a key article by Ferdig (2007) sets the scene and provides a foundation for what we know currently on the topic. The systemic literature review on Sustainability Leadership done by Suriyankietkaew et al. (2018) and scholar databases such

as Semantic and Litmaps put this article as one of the most influential on the topic (see chapter 3.5.2.). Thanks to the foundational work by Ferdig (2007) and further theoretical and empirical advancements made by Visser and Courtice (2011), Galpin and Whittington (2012), Burns et al. (2015), Armani et al. (2020) and Sajjad et al. (2023), we will see that, similar to Holistic Leadership, Sustainability Leadership challenges traditional hierarchical leadership models, moving more towards collaborative, values-driven, and systemic approaches.

2.2.1. Setting the scene for Sustainability Leadership: Ferdig, 2007

For starters Ferdig (2007) in her work “Sustainability Leadership: Co-creating a Sustainable Future” redefines the concept of Leadership in a sustainability context, changing the view that leadership is limited to formal positions. Instead, she argues that anyone who takes responsibility for addressing sustainability challenges is a sustainability leader. The argument goes along the way of a broader discussion within leadership arguing that leadership is a collective and dynamic process rather than a hierarchal one (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Another key argument in the paper is the need for open systems thinking. This perspective emphasizes that individuals, organizations, and nations are not isolated entities but are interconnected within themselves and within complex social and ecological systems. So, any action taken at any level, influences and is influenced by other levels and broader systems, which makes it essential for leaders to adopt a multilevel and interconnected approach when facing sustainability challenges.

Within this multilevel and interconnected system thinking, Ferdig (2007) highlights that leaders need to work across different disciplines and with multiple stakeholders. Paradox, contradiction and different points of view are not a sign of barriers, but integral aspects of healthy systems that turn to innovation and adaptability.

From Ferdig (2007) we identify some key characteristics of sustainable leaders (see table 2).

Table 2 Characteristics of Sustainable Leaders (Ferdig, 2007)

Characteristics	Description
Informed and aware	They possess a deep understanding of the interconnection in all levels of sustainability systems
Realistic and courageous	They acknowledge the complexity and urgency of sustainability challenges, yet they take actions despite uncertainty.
Personally hopeful:	They inspire others through optimism and a commitment to long-term systemic change.
Collaborative	Contrary to traditional leadership models that focus on control and direction, sustainable leaders encourage participation in decision-making and collective action.

2.2.2 Further contributions based on Ferdig 2007 on Sustainability Leadership

While Ferdig (2007) provided key concepts and attributes to Sustainability Leadership, later contributions strengthened the field by refining and empirically validating some of these ideas. First, we have Visser and Courtice (2011), who interviewed business executives from leading

global companies. Identifying sustainability leadership within the contextual school of leadership, their findings reinforce Ferdig’s ideas on changing the perspective from individualistic leadership to systemic and values-driven leadership. Visser and Courtice (2011) propose the Cambridge Sustainability Leadership Model which integrates three core dimensions: Leadership Context (internal and external), Individual Leader (traits, styles, skills and knowledge) and Leadership Actions (towards transformation).

For Visser and Courtice (2011), context plays a key role in Sustainability Leadership and will influence how the organization acts and responds to it. For example, giving more importance to certain aspects, like environmental laws that affect their day-to-day operations. Yet they provide key aspects that seem to be common for sustainable leaders, and certain actions that need to be made when aiming for sustainable development (see figure 4). They concluded, first by hinting about paradoxes within sustainability along with the need for survival and proposed seven key characteristics of Sustainability Leadership:

1. Systemic understanding, 2. Emotional intelligence, 3. Values orientation, 4. Compelling vision, 5. Inclusive style 6. Innovative approach, and 7. Long-term perspective.

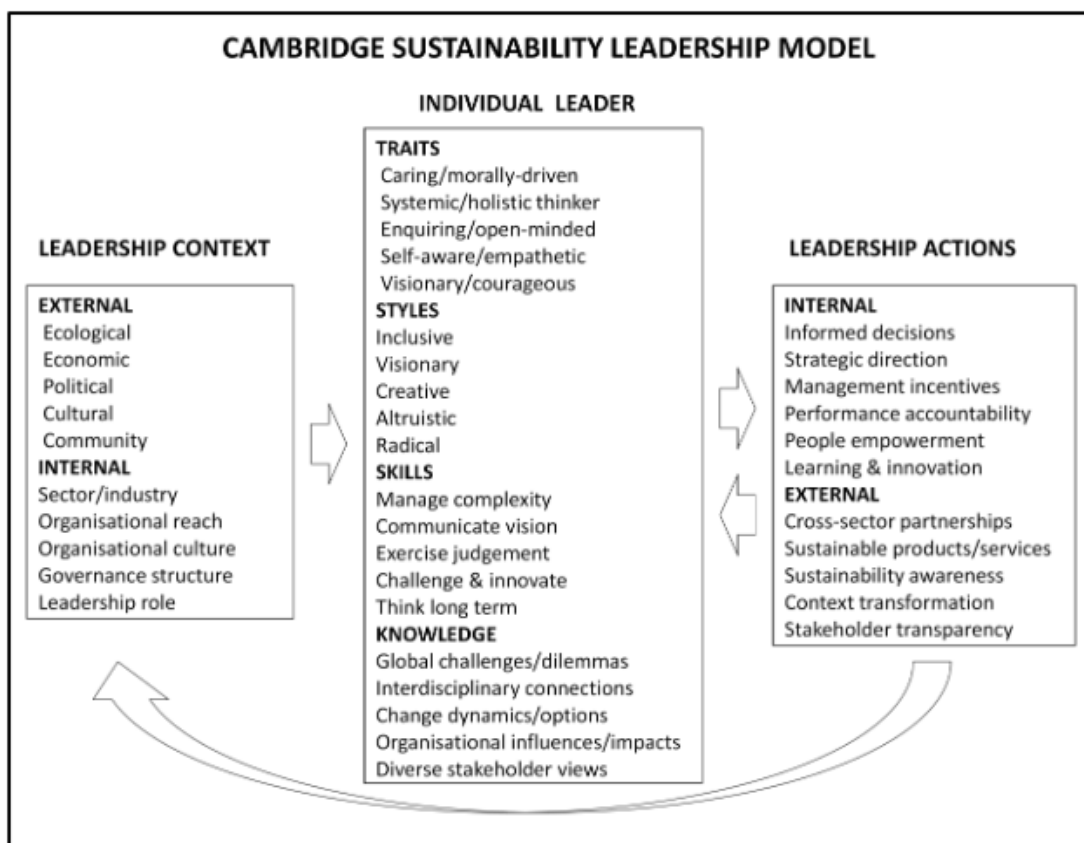


Figure 4 Sustainability Leadership: Linking Theory and Practice. Visser, W., and Courtice, P. (2011).

Galpin and Whittington (2012), on the other hand, created a more practical roadmap for organizations, which linked sustainability leadership to business strategy. They proposed a framework that integrates leadership behaviours with corporate sustainability initiatives. By doing so, they identified key leadership traits—such as vision, empowerment, and systemic thinking—to integrate sustainability into organizational culture. They build a great part of their

model on the basis of change management, reason why integrating sustainability into organizational culture is key to integrating sustainability in the organization development process, as such, leaders' traits and how they influence people are also very important.

Burns et al. (2015) further support the foundational ideas of Ferdig, emphasizing how important the role of leadership is in systemic change. They also argue that it is essential for there to be a change in the traditional leadership paradigms of top-down models to more inclusive, collaborative, and reflective models. Which reinforces the argument of Ferdig (2007) that Sustainability Leadership is not about authoritative decision-making but about creating conditions where multiple stakeholders can engage in co-creating solutions and strategies for change.

Burns et al. (2015) offer some other critical aspects of sustainability leadership; Leadership as a way of being, leaders for sustainability who operates from a values-driven mindset, acting on principles such as justice, equity, adaptability, and interconnection. And leadership in a living systems paradigm where leaders stop seeing organizations and businesses as mechanistic entities that can be controlled and predicted, but view them from an adaptive, emergent approach based on complexity science.

Bundell (2015), in a research-based report for the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership, offers some practical insights into how sustainability leadership manifests across sectors. Thanks to qualitative research in the form of interviews with practitioners and case studies from business, government, and civil society, Bundell provides a narrative of leadership traits and organizational conditions that either enable or hinder sustainability transitions.

Bundell reinforces Ferdig's (2007) systems thinking by stressing that sustainability leaders are distinguished not by their position, but by their ability to connect different parts of complex systems. The report brings additional insights by emphasizing the emotional and psychological resilience required of sustainability leaders.

Armani et al. (2020) expands on Ferdig's ideas further by identifying more specific attributes of sustainability leaders (see figure 5). On one hand, their study categorizes these attributes into cognitive, behavioural, and emotional dimensions, which lead us to confirm the complexity of sustainability leadership as a multidimensional construct. They also highlighted the importance of leaders creating shared values with stakeholders, which closely relates to Ferdig's idea about co-creation. They also bring into consideration developing strategies for sustainability, as an overall roadmap for leaders and the organization. On the other hand, this study adds a quantitative perspective, adding to the change of view of Sustainability Leadership from something merely conceptual to measurable and with practical implications.



Figure 5 What are the Attributes of Sustainable Leadership? Armani, A. B., Petrini, M., and Santos, A. C. (2020)

We finally arrive at Sajjad et al. (2024) who introduced the Multi-Level Sustainability Leadership Framework (figure 6), a comprehensive integrative review and conceptual synthesis of Sustainability Leadership. This model emphasizes the interplay between individual (micro), organizational (meso), and societal (macro) mechanisms that shape sustainability leadership developing each of their elements and their open systemic and mutual relationship showcasing the complexity and multilevel characteristic of Sustainability Leadership.

One of their key assertions is that Sustainability Leadership is not only about implementing sustainability initiatives but about deeply integrating an organizational commitment to sustainability values. They also highlight that effective sustainability leaders must navigate tensions between short-term business objectives and long-term sustainability goals and build upon the paradox reality, already briefly mentioned by Visser and Courtice (2011), which enable leaders to embrace contradictions rather than seek simplistic solutions. This insight is very valuable in today's rapidly evolving world.

Furthermore, Sajjad et al. (2024) introduce a leadership development roadmap for individuals and organizations to develop sustainability leadership capabilities over time. Their emphasis on continuous learning and adaptation relates highly with Ferdig's (2007) thoughts on systemic awareness and participatory leadership.

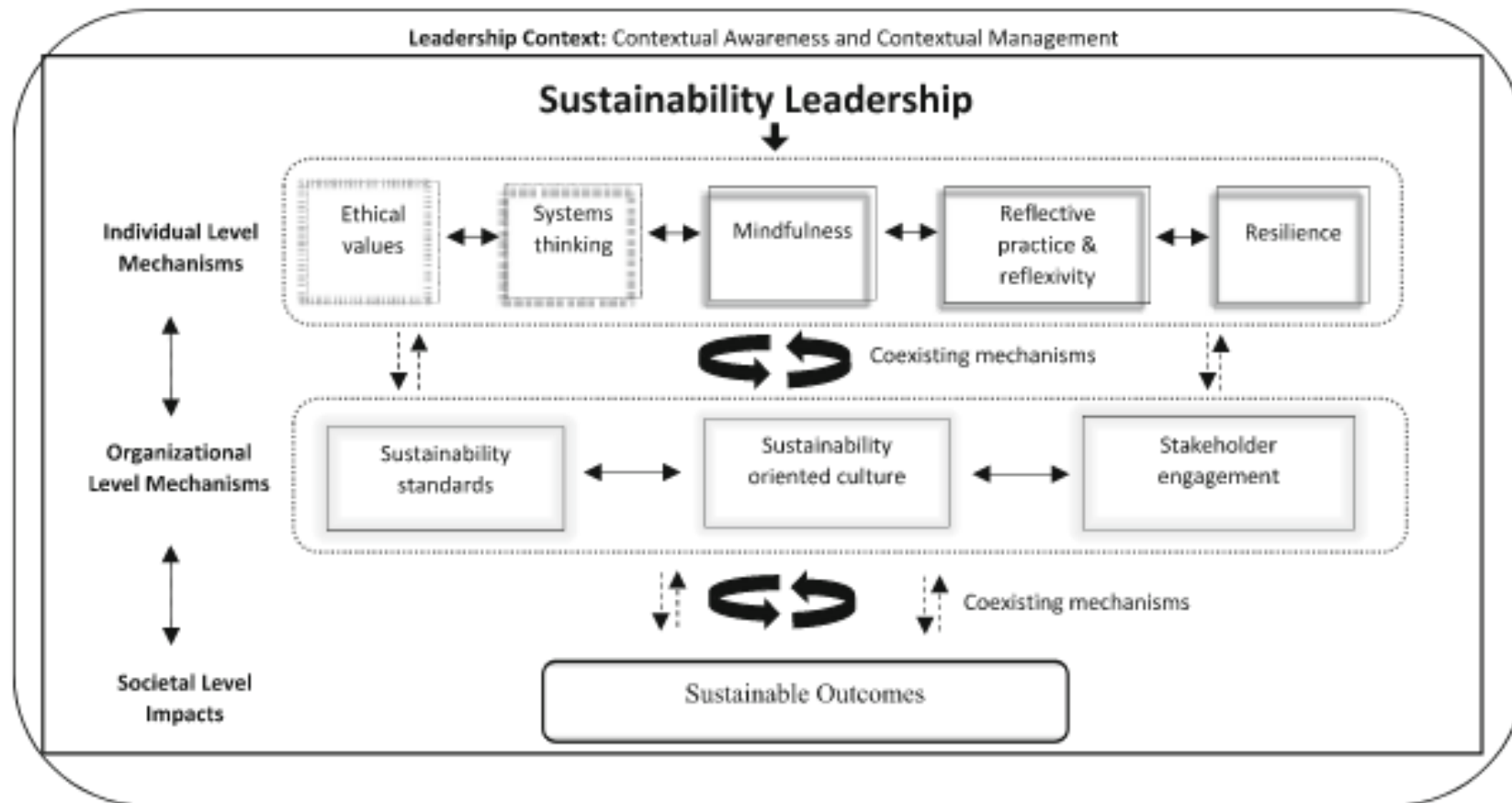


Figure 6 Sustainability leadership: An integrative review and conceptual synthesis. *Business Strategy and the Environment*. Sajjad, A., Eweje, G., and Raziq, M. M. (2024)

2.2.3. Conclusion: Sustainability Leadership

The field of sustainability leadership has developed significantly from early conceptual frameworks to more comprehensive models that address many of the complexities of sustainability challenges. We began with Ferdig (2007), who established foundational principles like the systems thinking, ethical commitment, stakeholder engagement (co-creation) and cooperative leadership, to Visser (2011), Burns et al. (2015), Armani et al. (2020), and Sajjad et al. (2024) who built upon those principles and integrated other insights from other yet relatable perspectives such as transformational leadership, strategic management, and paradox paradigm that gave robustness to the field. We conclude that Sustainability Leadership has in its centre a values-driven mindset, with principles like justice, long-term stewardship, collaboration, and resilience. Leaders also embrace paradox and complexity, navigating tensions between short-term needs and long-term ecological and social goals. An important idea that we embrace as a pivotal point is that all leaders, and sustainability leaders in particular, are not defined by position but by their ability to engage with diverse stakeholders, foster co-creation, and embed sustainability into culture and systems.

2.3 The development of Holistic Sustainability Leadership

After reading the academic groundings relating to holistic leadership and sustainability leadership, and before proceeding in more detail, we want to clarify the following two essential terms: Holistic and Integrative. Integrative, used by some authors in sustainability leadership, is the combining of different things to create one whole. Holistic, however, is where individual parts of a whole are interconnected and can only be explained by considering them as a collective reference of the whole.

We refer to the interpretation of Integrative Sustainability as the focus of the individual components of Sustainability (being the TBL) forming a whole. Versus our focus of this thesis, in which we refer to the interpretation of Holistic Sustainability as the focus on TBL only being achieved through the understanding of the interconnection between the components which make the whole.

Having defined Holistic Sustainability, this thesis explores the type of leadership that is needed to realise this concept: The Holistic Sustainable Leader.

We consider this explanation valuable not only for you as the reader, to create clear and transparent communication, but also for ourselves, to specify our sense of direction as well as the research boundaries as we focus on the topic we want to investigate, namely, Holistic Sustainability Leadership.

As we explore the concept of Holistic Sustainability Leadership, we acknowledge that sustainability is not merely a framework to be adopted but a systemic transformation that requires leaders capable of bridging gaps, negotiating conflicting interests, and steering collective action toward meaningful change.

Now, after concluding our literature research on Holistic Leadership and Sustainability Leadership, we aim to integrate those concepts, principles and attributes, categorizing them into Key/Core values, Attributes/Principles and Practical Practices, turning the theoretical insights for practical use. These concepts, principles and attributes are translated into fields of Being, Doing, Believing and Visioning. First, we will analyse their similarities and differences, then we will integrate them into the Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework, after which we will present our visual conceptual framework, that will be tested (see chapter 4).

Table 3 Holistic Sustainability analysis table

	Holistic Leadership	Sustainability Leadership	Holistic Sustainability Leadership
<i>Being</i>	Fostering a higher purpose for the greater good; The role of self in relation to your circle of control, influence and concern, and to those around you (integrity with self and unity with others)	Ethical commitment, Long-term thinking, Interconnectedness, Justice and Equity	Ethical consistency; Long-term stewardship; Justice and equity; Authenticity; Interconnectedness
<i>Doing</i>	Embracing and leveraging emotional intelligence, serving others, continuously developing oneself and others ethically, emotionally and spiritually	Collaborative and Participatory Decision-Making, Embedding Values into Strategy and Culture, Facilitating Stakeholder Engagement	Facilitating stakeholder engagement; Leading/following others ethically; Self-development; Participatory decision-making; Embedding values in strategy
<i>Believing</i>	Self-awareness; altruism; emotional intelligence; authenticity; harmony and flexibility	Systems Thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptive capacity, openness, shared purpose, lead change	Emotional intelligence; System thinking; Adaptive capacity; Shared purpose; Harmony and flexibility; Self-awareness; Transformational mindset

2.4 Conceptual Framework

In this section, we will provide a graphic version of the Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework (see figure 7) and a detailed explanation, drawing from the development process insights (Table 3).

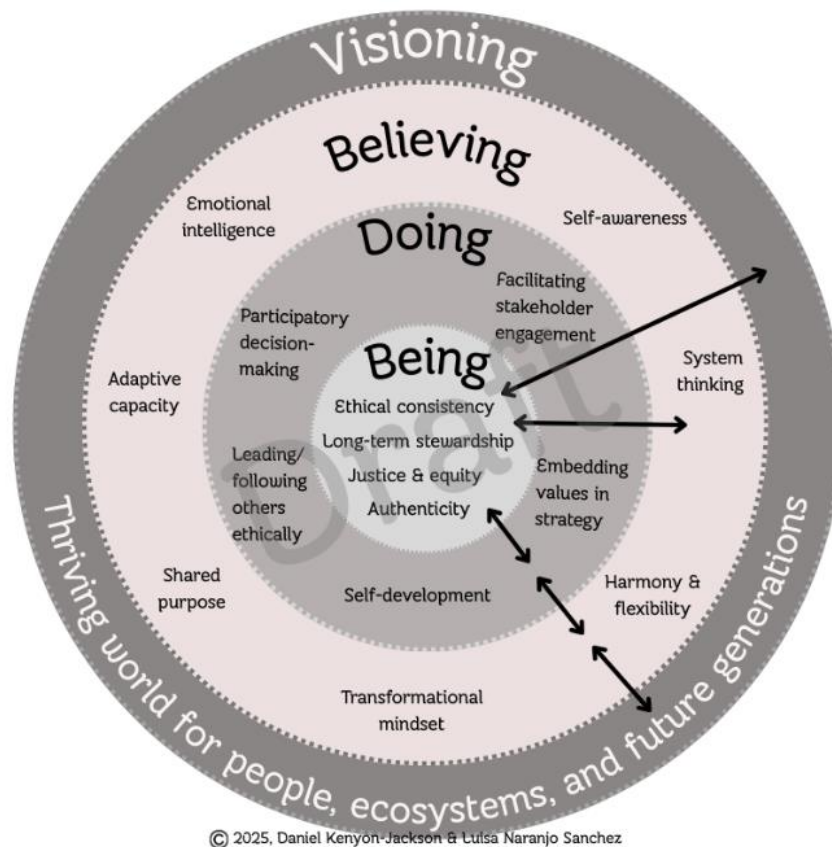


Figure 7 Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework

We decided to represent the framework as a circular model, using as inspiration the visualization of Schaffner (2023) (see chapter 2.1.2). It is important for this model to be contextually invariantly applicable and irrespective of the individual's role, whether it is as a formal leader, informal leader or follower, as these roles are consistently interchangeable and never static. And, in order to achieve significant real positive change in the world, we need everyone involved to know about it and/or to practice this with a holistic view. The framework is structured in 4 layers or spheres that are interconnected:

Being: The innermost layer represents the core values or inner self that individuals are in order to navigate and drive sustainability leadership holistically. This is one of the big contributions from Holistic Leadership and involves understanding one's role and values in relation to the other aspects within one's fields of influence and concern.

Doing: This represents the actions or practices from a leadership perspective that lead to sustainable development. These actions are taken by all roles involved and it is related to the influence the person has on their environment.

Believing: This layer relates to the attributes/skills that support holistic sustainability leadership. It relates to how you process things mentally and the role of the self in interaction with others and the external environment.

Visioning: This outermost layer represents the bigger picture of Holistic Sustainability Leadership, serving as the interpretation of sustainability within this framework. The Visioning

sphere defines this goal as a thriving world for people, ecosystems, and future generations. "People" includes all individuals, and "Ecosystems" refers to the environment, biodiversity, and even built environments. While relating to the triple bottom line (people, planet, profit), "thriving world" is seen as a broader concept.

These four spheres are connected by bidirectional arrows. These arrows are intended to visualize the dynamic, continuous, and iterative process of leadership. The framework is not static. The bidirectional nature signifies that the spheres influence each other.

3. Methodology and Methods

Basing our methodology and methods on the research onion developed by Saunders et al. (2019), this chapter outlines the research philosophy as pragmatism, an ontology position as social constructivism, and an epistemology of intuitive and authoritarian knowledge. It continues with the research design; for the role of theory development, we use an abductive approach. The methodological choice is qualitative, and the research strategy is a case study. Followed by how we conducted our desk-based research using literature reviews, and our empirical validation in the ways of semi-structured interviews in a Delphi-type study. It continues with our approach to data analysis, quality assurance, and ethical considerations.

3.1. Research Philosophy

3.1.1. Pragmatism

Saunders et al. (2023) defines research philosophy as “a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge”. This research philosophy is shown through the research project, in terms of what we consider as knowledge to be real, and what relevant data constitutes and supports that knowledge. In terms of research in the business and management field, Saunders et al. (2023) argue that there is not a “best” research philosophy, since this academic field emerged from a mixture of disciplines and adopted their associated philosophies. Taking a pluralist stance, they expose five major philosophies: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism, and suggest, as best practice, to outline and justify our own philosophical choices to provide coherent research.

Our study takes a pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism stands as a reconciliation between objectivism and subjectivism, meaning that the theories and hypotheses are relevant, but they are instruments that need to contribute to practice. As Saunders et al. (2023) and Dudovskiy (2024) explain, pragmatism confirms that it is possible for there to be different types of knowledge and methods. “Pragmatists recognise that there are many different ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research, that no single point of view can ever give the entire picture and that there may be multiple realities.” (Saunders et al., 2023). Therefore, pragmatists focus on using a method or various methods that enable credibility, reliability and relevance in the data in order to advance the research (Keleman and Rumens, 2008). This approach is particularly relevant for this study, where the phenomenon of Holistic Sustainable Leadership involves dynamic, relational, and context-dependent human interactions.

3.1.2. Ontology Position: Social Constructivism

Building upon that philosophy, we have chosen a social constructivist ontology position; we are in line with the perspective that what is deemed real can be socially constructed and contextually interpreted (Dudovskiy, 2024). This is particularly relevant when studying leadership, from a relational, dynamic, and socially practiced perspective (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In that sense, leadership cannot be universally measured but has to be studied and understood as how leaders and followers interact and change roles in real-world situations (Uhl-Bien, 2006). With that in mind, we also argue that sustainability is not a static concept, but a social concept

constructed by human beings, that aims to ensure the wellbeing of the planet we share for current and future generations as Purvis et al. (2019) argues that is how sustainability was developed in their search for the historical origins of sustainability. Therefore, subjective interpretations contribute significantly to this field of research.

3.1.3. Epistemology stance: Intuitive and Authoritarian knowledge

Aligned with our philosophy and ontology perspective, our research understanding originates from intuitive knowledge (Dudovskiy, 2024) because we believe that sustainability is important, and there has not been enough progress in sustainability efforts. In order for us to validate our intuitive preconceptions, we approached an authoritarian knowledge position (Dudovskiy, 2024). Furthermore, we believe that experts and practitioners in this field of study contribute to this authoritarian stance. Therefore, we accept their insights and ideas as knowledge.

3.2. Research Design:

Following the next steps of the research onion by Saunders et al. (2019), to ensure cohesive research, the next layers are the approach to theory development, methodological choice and strategy.

3.2.1. Approach to theory development: Abductive

Taking into account our philosophical position as pragmatism and Saunders et al.'s (2023) explanation of philosophical underpinnings, positioning theory development of Abduction being used in pragmatist stances, we take an abductive approach. We collect data from academic research to explore a phenomenon: Holistic Sustainability Leadership, where we “identify themes and explain patterns, to generate or modify an existing theory”: Sustainability Leadership. Which we subsequently “test through additional data collection”, by means of interviews with experts (Saunders et al., 2023).

Because we believe in authoritarian knowledge, we first research academic works that have high validity and relevance. First, research is conducted on two main existing theories: Holistic Leadership and Sustainability Leadership, which are integrated to develop new insights. These new insights are then composed into a conceptual framework. After that, the conceptual framework is validated by experts in the field in the first part of the interview. In the next part of the interview, we gather practical insights to contribute to the clarity and applicability of the conceptual framework. This in hand corresponds with our pragmatism stance.

In line with our pragmatic approach and this abductive approach, we also made selective and transparent use of digital tools, including generative AI and AI-assisted research platforms, to support our writing and reflection process.

3.2.2. Methodological choice: qualitative.

Because of the aim of achieving an in-depth understanding, which comes from exploratory study, Saunders (2023) says that the methodological choice of being qualitative is practically suited. Because of the subjective and social constructivism stance, with a qualitative methodological choice, researchers operate in a research context to achieve access to meanings, achieve an in-depth understanding, and establish trust from the participants (Saunders, 2023).

Saunders (2023) supports that qualitative data collection is suited for abductive theory development (Saunders, 2023).

3.2.3 Research Strategy: Case study

Because of its qualitative nature, Saunders (2023) explains that a case study approach, being an in-depth inquiry on a phenomenon in a real case setting (Yin, 2018), is a suitable method to approach the phenomenon of Holistic Sustainability Leadership. Due to the study being conducted in a short period of time, the case study is best used as opposed to, for instance, longitudinal or cross-sectional. This is because the depth of the data is not achieved in a cross-sectional study compared to a case study.

3.3. Literature Reviews

This theoretical exploration begins deductively (from theory to data). As a result, the literature review serves as the foundation for our study, allowing us to identify theoretical gaps and establish a basis for Holistic Sustainability Leadership. We systematically searched academic databases and reports to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both Sustainability Leadership and Holistic Leadership, and built a database of our own in a spreadsheet that helps us categorize the articles that contribute to our conceptual framework directly or to our problem area and background (see appendix 7 for a sample view).

Additionally, an AI-assisted research platform, NotebookLM, was used to support the literature review process, particularly by mapping out the context, research gaps, results, and contributions across some of the articles we first deemed significant to our research.

3.3.1. Literature for Problematization

Our literature review aligns with the findings of Sajjad et al. (2024), who identified a lack of empirical validation for their proposed leadership framework. To confirm this gap, we reviewed further studies and found that while theoretical contributions on sustainability leadership exist, either their empirical validation focuses on one aspect of sustainability (Wang et al., 2014; Lubin et al., 2017; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2022) or the holistic view of it, particularly through contextual application, lacks the empirical validation (Sajjad et al., 2024). This justifies our decision to develop a conceptual framework integrating holistic leadership into sustainability leadership and validate it through expert interviews.

To build our problem area, we connected the beginnings of argumentation for sustainable development, where some mention of leadership was hinted at (Elkington, 1994; Gladwin et al., 1995; Starik and Rands, 1995) to early clear discussion of the importance of leadership in that context (Hartman et al., 1999), to current progress of sustainable development using the results of the SDG Report (2024) and the Europe SDG Report (2025) in order to conclude that current leadership models have failed to achieve sustainable development. All these studies are relevant to how the sustainability field has been developed both by academics and practitioners alike (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The strategy search for the deductive research approach was using (AI- powered) research tools Semantics.org and Litmaps.com in the web browser Google Chrome with the integrated Zotero

extension installed. This approach was implemented because of the choice of databases containing peer-reviewed articles, and to increase the ease of thematizing sources and collecting an overview of all the sources. We introduce the keywords Sustainability Leadership and/or Sustainable Leadership, filtering by decades (eg. 1951-1960, 1961-1970, 1971-1980...), and sorted the results by most influential (Semantics.org, sf.).

3.5.2. For the Frame of reference, Holistic Sustainability Leadership

We conducted keyword-based searches in AI-powered research tools for scientific literature such as Litmaps, and Semantics. Focusing on the fields of Sustainability Leadership and Holistic Leadership, our search included:

Keywords: “Sustainability Leadership,” and “Holistic Leadership”.

Filters: *Fields of study:* Business, economics and psychology.

Sort: We apply the sorting (which articles appear first) using the most influential (Semantics.org, sf)

Selection Criteria: Relevance, citation impact, and contribution to theoretical advancements.

The search was organised based on relevance and historical originality. We chose the first major contribution on Holistic Leadership, the work from Quattro et al. (2007), as the foundational work to build upon with later research. And Ferdig (2007) was identified as the earliest theoretical contribution, the first to conceptualize and define Sustainability Leadership, which was later confirmed by the systematic literature review made by Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew (2018).

At a later stage, we synthesized the literature on both sides by first explaining the core concepts that derived from the respective field chapters to formulate our interpretation of Holistic Sustainability Leadership. After we uncover the key concepts to come to the conclusion on defining Holistic Sustainability Leadership, we integrate these key concepts into a framework so that the concepts become more transparently communicated and clearer to understand.

3.6. Interview as Data Collection

After the formulation of a theoretical framework defining Holistic Sustainability Leadership, we test our conceptual framework using a qualitative method to gain deeper insights, confirm the accuracy, and potential implications of our theoretical framework. These interviews connect the deductive approach with the inductive approach, where we now go from data to theory, making the whole research an inductive design. According to Sauders et al. (2023), interviews are an excellent way to acquire primary data that is rich and meaningful, and they can be applied on a one-time basis as case studies or with longitudinal studies. With our purpose to validate and improve the clarity and applicability of the framework, we use a Delphi technique, which aims to combine the knowledge of several experts to come to a better prognosis (Naisola-Ruiter, 2022).

3.6.1 Justification of Choice of Interview and Semi-Structure

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured according to Saunders et al. (2023). We chose the semi-structured format. This method gives us a chosen structure for later data analysis, but also the freedom to use any of the three aspects that make a semi-structured interview uniquely valuable for case studies: participants are free to lead the conversation into new areas that were previously not considered; questions are open-ended; and the order and logic of the questioning may need to be varied (Saunders, 2023). Interviews also allow interviewees to hear themselves think out loud to talk about things they may not have previously thought about (Saunders, 2023).

This method aligns with our pragmatic research philosophy (see chapter 3.1.1), which acknowledges that knowledge can be drawn from both theory and practice, and that different methods can help reveal different types of insights. It also connects with our social constructivism stance (see chapter 3.1.2), where reality is understood as context-dependent and shaped through interaction. Since our goal is to explore how Holistic Sustainability Leadership is developed and practically used, we consider the input of practitioners and actors within this field of research essential to validate our framework.

3.6.2. Development Questions

The interview questions were developed first to ascertain the interviewee's expertise and relationship with sustainability and leadership. Secondly, after being shown the framework without being led by us, questions were developed to explore the clarity of the framework and potential applicability. Thirdly, after explaining our development process of the framework, the questions were aimed at discovering potential limitations and areas for improvement, whilst also keeping a direct relationship with the theories. Depending on the interviewee, follow-up supporting questions were asked to be able to build upon the feedback received (see Appendix 1).

This structure is aligned with our epistemological stance (see chapter 3.1.3), where we accept both intuitive and authoritarian knowledge as valid sources of insight. By designing open and flexible interview questions, we aimed to create space for interviewees to share both their expertise and lived experiences. Additionally, the development of these questions was guided by the purpose of this study (see chapter 1.5), which is to evaluate and further develop the conceptual framework of Holistic Sustainability Leadership through real-world validation. The interview questions, therefore, served as a bridge between the theoretical foundation of the study and its practical application.

3.6.3. Selection and Presentation of Participants

The participants were selected through purposive sampling (Saunders, 2023) within our direct and indirect network to include individuals with leadership or sustainability-related expertise. Experts were identified based on their demonstrated sustainability and or leadership positions, involvement in sustainability or leadership initiatives, or significant academic contributions within these fields. As Naisola-Ruiter (2022) argues for a Delphi study, the knowledge,

experience, and background of the participants is what makes them experts. Our initial baseline of interviews was three experts' interviews. After feedback and to strengthen our validation process, we reached out to 13 experts and obtained 6 positive interviews. We reached out to the experts via email (see Appendix 2) or LinkedIn messaging (see Appendix 3), clearly stating our intention of validating a theoretically built framework for practical use (see Chapter 3.2).

The first four interviews were sent out via email. The second two were sent by LinkedIn messages. These invites included a Calendly link. For our direct network, we sent a detailed email with the Calendly link; for the indirect network, we first approached them on LinkedIn with a shorter message. When receiving confirmation of interest for an interview, we would send a Calendly invite, and we would then receive confirmation when those people put the Calendly invite in their diary by selecting one of the available timeslots. Seven potential interviewees who received the Calendly link either never responded, responded to the invitation too late, or never booked a timeslot. The booking link, Calendly, did not give participants the option to select an interview software, but they could select the timeslot based on what we put as available timeslots, which aligned with our schedule. To ascertain the participants as experts, here is a summary of their backgrounds:

Table 4 Summary of Interviewee Backgrounds

	<i>Sector</i>	<i>Role(s)</i>	<i>Expertise</i>	<i>Leadership experience</i>	<i>Sustainability experience</i>
<i>Interviewee 1</i>	Private / Coaching	Former CEO, Leadership coach	Executive strategy, ESG, DEI	CEO in multiple industries, founder of a coaching firm	Social sustainability (DEI, trust, wellbeing), strategic ESG integration
<i>Interviewee 2</i>	Private / Translation; copywriting	Founder, Rotary club leader	Communication, gender equity, sustainability reporting	Business founder, regional Rotary governor, public speaker	Sustainability communications, CSRD, gender equity, global civic engagement
<i>Interviewee 3</i>	Private / Tech; consultancy	Team lead, office director	Operations, goal setting, implementation	Cross-country team management	Long-term planning, sustainable operations
<i>Interviewee 4</i>	Public / Advisory	Sustainability advisor; Former head of sustainability in banking	Criminology, social strategy, strategic prevention	National sustainability lead; network director	Crime prevention, wellbeing, long-term societal impact
<i>Interviewee 5</i>	Academia / NGO	Master's student; Global Shapers member	Climate action, youth engagement	Project-based leadership; youth and community organizing	SDGs, grassroots sustainability, climate communication
<i>Interviewee 6</i>	Academia / Legal	PhD researcher in international law and ESG; former UN and NGO practitioner	Human rights, ESG law, international development	Policy and legal advising	ESG policy critique, legal frameworks

A brief background was acquired before sending invitations, either by checking their LinkedIn profiles or by referral from our direct network. Further validation of their expertise was acquired during each interview conducted as the first part of the interview to ascertain participants' background and experience with Leadership and Sustainability.

3.6.4 Conducting Interviews: Microsoft Teams

Interviews are conducted online through Microsoft Teams and recorded and transcribed automatically within the program used with each participant's consent. Each session is expected to last 45–60 minutes. In line with our ethical stance (see chapter 3.8), we will remind participants of their right to withdraw consent or participation at any time during the research. We decided to use Microsoft Teams because of the AI transcription functionality built into this software. We used Calendly to share a calendar link in which participants could select their availability and would easily receive an immediate confirmation of the booked timeslot for the interview, together with a link to the Microsoft Teams meeting.

The choice to conduct interviews online is in line with our pragmatic research philosophy (see chapter 3.1), which encourages the use of practical tools and flexible methods that can produce credible and relevant insights in real-world contexts. It also supports our social constructivism ontology (see chapter 3.2), where knowledge is shaped through interaction and dialogue. Using Microsoft Teams allowed us to talk with the participants in their own environments, creating a space where they could reflect and respond in ways that felt comfortable to them. We consider this interaction central to the kind of knowledge this study aims to explore.

3.7. Data Analysis

The answers we received from participants on perceived interpretations of Sustainability were to gain practical insights into the siloed or interconnected relations that practical experts have of Sustainability. After which, the insights gained from participants on their interpretation of Leadership contributed to gaining practical authoritarian feedback on whether leadership to them is considered a process or a role. We also analyze through our Holistic Sustainability Leadership lenses whether their concept as a leader is similar to our model. We finally analyze which aspects of our model the interviewees agree with, do not agree with or understand, suggested changes for, and introduced new aspects that are not in the model, both before and after our explanation of the model. This way we confirm their expertise, validate, and improve the clarity and practical applicability of the framework. We analyze the data in three steps:

Step 1. Familiarization

We colour-coded the answers of our interviewees according to the structure of the interview to present the first results in a structured way, with clear positions and opinions of each of the interviewees. With this familiarization of the data, we presented our results in chapter 4 (see appendix 4 for a sample of the coding in one of the interviews).

Table 5 Thematisation for becoming familiar with the data	
Highlights and fonts	
Themes (highlighted colours)	Background (Automatic) Relationship with Sustainability (Turquoise) Interpretation of being a leader (Bright Green) Interpretation of HSL framework (Pink)

	Feedback post explanation of HSL framework (Gray)
Codes for interpretation and Feedback post explanation	agreement (Green font colour) disagreement (Dark Red font colour) suggested change (Automatic) New concepts introduced (Yellow font colour)

Table 6 Thematizing the collected data

Relationship with Sustainability	Holistic	Siloed		
Interpretation of being a leader	Being	Doing	Believing	
Interpretation of HSL framework	Agree	Disagree	Change	New
Feedback post explanation of HSL framework	Agree; no need for change	Agree after disagreed; Explanation needed	Disagree; remove	Disagree; change

Step 2. Thematic comparison across interviewees

After becoming familiar with the collected data as explained above, we continued a deeper thematization. At this stage, we looked across the interviews to identify common themes as well as contrasting viewpoints within each of the layers within our framework. This process helped us see shared agreements, proposed changes, and differences among the participants' perspectives. To do this systematically, we created separate tables for each of the four framework spheres: *Being*, *Doing*, *Believing*, and *Visioning*, along with one for the overall structure of the framework. In each table (see table 7), we categorized the interview data based on whether participants agreed with a component, suggested changes, partially agreed or disagreed, or introduced new ideas not originally captured in the framework. The results related to *Being* were highlighted yellow; the results related to *Doing* were highlighted green; the results related to *Believing* were highlighted grey; the results related to *Visioning* were highlighted turquoise; the results related to the overall framework were highlighted purple (see Appendix 5 for full codification).

Table 7 Categorizing the results

	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Content			
Place			

Step 3. Interpretation and Integration of Insights

In the final step of the analysis, we went from categorizing the experts' input, to interpreting its meaning in relation to our theoretical framework. This step focused on making sense of the

experts' reflections and whether they confirmed, questioned, or expanded the initial components of the Holistic Sustainability Leadership (HSL) framework. This step involved integrating the new insights into the development of our concept, supporting the iterative and reflective nature of our research design.

This interpretive work aligns with our abductive research approach (see chapter 3.2.1), where theory and empirical findings are in constant dialogue to create knowledge. The feedback received from interviewees not only validated several of the theoretical components but also provided other insights that helped us adapt the original structure and some components to a clearer and more practical new version.

3.8. Quality and Ethics

3.8.1. Quality

In order to assess the quality of research, two main traditional criteria are often used: reliability and validity. They are often used to evaluate research using a positivist philosophy. However, taking our pragmatist philosophical stance: the social constructivism ontology and qualitative design, there is a mismatch in assessing quality in our research. For that reason, we will incorporate a broader perspective based on the trustworthiness framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1989), as suggested by Saunders et al. (2023), as an alternative assessment. The framework provides more relevant criteria to assess qualitative research: dependability, credibility, and transferability. For understanding purposes, we will still use the traditional terms related to the alternative.

3.8.1.1 Dependability or Reliability

For qualitative research, dependability or reliability means “recording all changes that occur as research progress to produce a reliable/dependable account of the emerging research focus that may be understood and evaluated by others” (Guba and Lincoln, 1989 in Saunders et al. 2023). We maintained notes throughout our research process, created a Trello board (see Appendix 6 for a screenshot) dedicated specifically to our thesis project and a data base with relevant academic articles (see Appendix 7) and key information such as the purpose of the study, the main insights, the gap they fulfilled and the future research. As for data collection, we maintain the record and transcriptions to double-check our data analysis.

3.8.1.2 Credibility or internal validation

Internal validity of the findings evaluates whether our research accurately captures the phenomenon we aim to study (Saunders et al., 2023). One of the techniques to do that is triangulation, which involves using more than one source of data. We did that by methodologically building a conceptual framework based on a theoretical foundation and then collecting feedback from multiple experts. In addition to this, both authors participated actively in the analysis process, developing codes and themes together and challenging one another's interpretations.

3.8.1.3 Transferability or external validation

From a positivist point of view, transferability or external validation refers to generalisability, which we do not aim to do. Instead, we provide a detailed description of our research setting and participants, so the readers and future researchers can decide or judge the transferability of this study in their contexts.

3.8.2. Ethics

All interview participants are informed of the study's purpose, and consent is obtained before data collection processing. Data confidentiality and participant anonymity is ensured. This is in line with our ethical stance on the research, which is in the spirit of contributing to not only literature but also towards societal sustainability practices. Therefore, in line with the deontological theory of Kantianism, the interviewees and people involved in this research are not treated as a means to achieve a desired end for the research, but they are part of the end in themselves. With the results contributed by the interviewees, in this context, we do not seek to use the interviewees for our own benefits but merely aim to co-create and collaborate to lift one another to a higher wisdom by broadening our perspectives on the theory and practice.

The European Commission has created the GDPR to protect natural persons under law. Therefore, because it is also ethically in line with our stance on conducting this research, the data processing and/or controlling will be in accordance with this regulation. This means that personal data will only be processed and controlled during the period of research by the personal data processors and/or controllers as defined in chapter 4 of the GDPR, and deleted upon completion, unless participants give written consent to say differently. Following up on this, the research intentions have been clearly and transparently communicated to all interviewees before participation, in spirit of GDPR.

There are no maleficent intentions in this research. The research is set up so that it aims to potentially benefit the interviewees, whilst ensuring protection of subjects from harm, maintaining privacy, and providing the notion of informed consent. The interviewees have also been informed that they are free to opt out of the interview and withdraw consent at any time during the research process. The independence of the researchers is safeguarded to ensure that there is no conflict of interests or undue personal gains from the results.

We acknowledge the use of generative and AI-supported tools such as ChatGPT, Perplexity, and NotebookLM throughout the research and writing process. These tools were used to support reflection, synthesis, and communication, not to generate findings or make content decisions (see Appendix 8 for one of the prompts used). All critical interpretations, theoretical development, and final outputs were made by us as authors. We consider this a responsible and grounded use of emerging tools in academic work, aligned with current discussions around digital literacy and methodological innovation.

At the end of the research, this thesis was proofread by an external person for the purpose of solely checking the spelling, consistency of grammar, and referencing throughout. This is finally checked and approved by us as authors before publication to ensure the correctness and authenticity of this thesis in its entirety.

4. Empirical findings

In continuing the application of the methodology as stated in the previous chapter, this chapter compiles the results from the six interviews. For each interview, the results will be divided into multiple parts. The first three subchapters will cover the interviewee's background, their relationship with sustainability, and their interpretation of being a leader. After these parts have been covered, the results provide an uninfluenced interpretation of the Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework, before finally providing a post-explanation interpretation and providing feedback.

4.1. Interview 1

4.1.1. Interviewee background

As an entrepreneur, the founder of a heart-centred leadership business specialising in board advisory services and executive coaching, has an extensive background in experiences acting in a leadership role. Her CEO career started 15 years ago within broadcasting and lived in Africa. During this period, she was CEO for a large Swedish international broadcasting group in Africa. After her approximately five years as a CEO in Africa, she moved back to Sweden to venture into professional sports, leading to a first female CEO role for a professional ice hockey team in the top league, before being headhunted by yet another club.

Since then, she moved on to be CEO of a member's club for board of directors and business owners in Stockholm for five years. Now, for the past two years since starting her own business, she coaches CEOs and board members on topics such as sustainability and leadership. She continues to network a lot and tries to connect with likeminded people to scale and spread the awareness for a more compassionate leadership style.

4.1.2. Interviewee's relationship with sustainability

Around seven years ago, when the entrepreneur started working with the members club, she started to deep dive into the SDGs. This is when she saw how broad sustainability is and overwhelming the SDGs are, to the point that some sustainability goals contradict each other. "We need to reduce fossil fuel, but we also need to pull people out of poverty." was an exemplary comment which she understands from her experience in Africa. In the context she was able to experience, starting her CEO journey, it could be argued that fossil fuel has empowered and saved a lot of lives for people. This is where the mention of the challenge comes in, but you can prioritise the best you can when it comes to these challenges.

Back when the venturing into sustainability started for her, the contextual importance was more about the climate and biodiversity. Despite understanding that everything is in an ecosystem and connects, this biodiversity and climate related aspect of sustainability was hard to grasp due to it being beyond her field of expertise. What was more in her field, however, was the social and people aspect of sustainability. Her Global Heart Leaders field delves deeper into the impacts that events have on people such as the social effects of the pandemic and global change and inclusivity.

4.1.3. Interviewee's interpretation of being a leader

It comes down to an ability. Because while there are many people who can't afford to worry or talk about these afore mentioned topics, if you have the ability to be a leader, you have the responsibility to be one. So, if you can afford to worry and talk about these subjects and you have the platform to exercise your abilities, that then lifts you up to being a leader.

Continuing this, our first interviewee explains her interpretation of that one can be leader in different settings. Either in your community or in your family, you can be a leader. Setting a good example through your behaviour is one way of acting as a leader. But above that, the interpretation of being a leader is when someone takes action accordingly because they are passionate about issues and have integrity. This will accordingly have a ripple effect on others you inspire around you.

4.1.4. Interviewee's own interpretation of the HSL framework

When asked what the uninfluenced interpretation is of the HSL framework, initial thoughts were that this could apply to anything if the aspect Ethical is removed under Being, and the Vision tag is replaced with whatever you want. Then it makes a lot of sense because it is obviously all linked. Contrary to the flow that is currently shown in the framework, our Being and our Believing results in us Doing.

The thought process continues by the interviewee explaining that doing is the result of who you are, and once you start to listen and identify what you care about and talk to others, you then know about having a shared purpose and what that shared purpose is. With this in mind, it then becomes apparent that you are not the only one who feels a certain way. When you then feel strong enough in your sovereignty and your power, that's when you take action and do.

Initially, before the theoretical introduction of the framework, the interviewee suggested to change places between believing and doing because you are being and then you believe things and that's when action takes place. Everything is linked and the texts that you have in each layered bubble, but the interpretation is up to different people in what order it goes.

4.1.5. Post explanation feedback from interviewee

The interviewee understands that from an academic perspective, visualisations such as models are needed, but this subject is fluid and there is a constant evolution and growth. The most important thing is self-awareness and your core being; being aware of yourself and your surroundings and identify what truly motivates you and what integrity means to you and what is important to you.

According to our interviewee, for a 'normal' person, who hasn't given this topic much thought and to look at this to identify that there is a Being, and Believing and then a Vision and the actions you make in relation to those that will also change followed by this being dynamic, this could be really useful. The entrepreneur herself, who thinks about this all the time, sees this as part of the things she does. Others will be judging on the manifestations of who we are and our thoughts, so it doesn't matter how strong of a belief you have in something if you don't voice it

and don't act it. So, this framework can be used in a way to awaken that level of awareness in people who have not thought about this as much.

There is a potential concern, however. From a cultural context, raising your voice or opinions could be dangerous in some cultures. This is why it's important to feel safe in the environment to voice and act who you want to be and to live your values and your visions. In the long term, it's therefore about having a trusting environment for that where it can flourish.

Today's world is very polarised which could lead to messy situations when you voice out something different to the beliefs of the environment that you're in. People tend to gravitate to likeminded people, because it feels safe and it creates that safe environment. But the danger around that happening is that it creates even more polarity. Sometimes you need to find your group of people where you feel safe to explore. Polarity in the negative sense would be not respecting other people's views and perspectives. The way to overcome that is through communication and by talking, so that in the worst case, you come to the conclusion to agree to disagree. And best case, both parties reach a new layer of perspective and take some of the immediate anger or stress out of the equation. Reaching a higher wisdom.

A big challenge is convincing other people to think differently, and when you don't try to communicate to them from their perspective, it's a lot harder to reach them. And sometimes, it also means just walking away because there are billions of people on this planet, it's more important to focus on the impact you can make. In the end, we need to create a sustainable situation ourselves in our life so that we can continue to strive for what we believe in, in the long run.

When it comes to additional remarks, it was suggested to revise removing the ethical part and the vision tag line “thriving world for people, ecosystems and future generations” so that people can fill in those gaps for themselves, depending on their passion. This vision could perhaps be replaced by “Purpose” as it can be related to the TBL. Purpose is perhaps not as grand as the original phrase, but purpose is something important to you that you identified.

The current version, according to the interviewee, seems to come across as static and needs some additional explanation. This looks useful for people that are not as aware of this topic, because it feels static and more a solution for the present.

The concepts of what is ethical, and what means justice and equity can be context dependant. For some people, who can barely meet the bottom layers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, they perhaps have a different perspective than those with the analytical minds complaining about not landing a job whilst still being safe, having a roof above their heads and having food. So with this in mind, not everyone has the luxury to worry about climate change, because they don't even have these needs met.

The risk we face today in Sweden, is people living alone, and the importance of being in a tribe or community like the cavemen had, is not a survival necessity anymore as you can get food delivered to your doorstep. After rethinking, the interviewee indicates being convinced that long term stewardship should be in being.

To conclude, according to our first interviewee, the most important key to the people she coaches, is self-awareness. Knowing what triggers you have and why you keep returning to the same situation again and again.

4.2. Interview 2

4.2.1. Interviewee background

For Interview 2, we have a seasoned entrepreneur with a deep commitment to local-to-international community services organizations. She is a linguist who built up and currently owns a business in the language services sector, with a core vision that still keeps her going “good communication skills give access to opportunities”. She has also led ventures in tech and government collaboration projects such as producing spell checkers, grammar checkers or electronic dictionaries, and language resources and tools for the Dutch language. In addition to business leadership, she also has a regional governance position within a large international service organization, where they focus on youth empowerment, gender equity, and sustainability awareness.

4.2.2. Interviewee’s relationship with sustainability

Interviewee 2 has a long-standing relationship with sustainability, first, mainly related to her work as linguist and her business in language communication: copywriter for sustainability reports for an international company, responsible for writing on behalf of leaders in government, which includes communications to organizations that seek sustainable development, and supporter for corporate communications on the new legislation for sustainability reporting. Also, as community involved person, she holds a role as ambassador for Girls Empowerment, and she used to hold the position of president in the local Rotary club where she supported and promote the global ‘End Plastic Soup’ initiative in her community and country.

4.2.3. Interviewee’s interpretation of being a leader

“I believe I have a responsibility to share my talents, my skills, my network, to inspire others.” which is demonstrated by her involvement in the girl's empowerment movement, especially when giving and supporting presentations on that topic.

In terms of her business, she was the one building it up, always guided by her own vision, despite critics of not being entrepreneur enough because her main aspiration was not to make excessive profit, but to provide value to her costumers, being individuals or business who would get better opportunities because of her services.

4.2.4. Interviewee’s own interpretation of the HSL framework

When asking about her interpretation of the framework without any intervention or explanation on our side, her first insight is that the model appeals to her, especially the use of the gerund form of the verb for the layer’s titles: being, doing, believing, visioning, since that hints a call to action, an “active” verb that leads you to do things.

Something that was not clear was the use of the arrows, and how to begin reading the model, if from the inside to outside, or the other way around, and if the arrows direct to a specific aspect

of the circle (e.g. Ethical consistency) to the visioning or if it's the whole circle that relates to the other circles.

Her approach to explain the framework was to create a sentence using the active verb with the attributes inside the circles, which conclude to:

For the Being Layer:

Agreement with

Ethical consistency: “at your core you have ethical consistency”

Authenticity: “you could extend that to personal authenticity” “What do you do when nobody's watching?”

May need change

Equity and Justice: “it’s also a belief; you believe in justice and equity” “or you are just and equitable?” “If you are any kind of leader, -western European leader- you find hard to think that as a leader you don’t believe in justice and equity, so this does not make it particular for a Holistic sustainability leader, “maybe you could elaborate on that. Go a little bit further.”

To add:

Sustainability or sustainable: “That is the essence of actual core.”

Not completely agree

Long-term Stewardship: are you long-term stewardship? Maybe you are a long-term steward? “I’d almost put it in doing looking after the environment, taking care of the environment is something that you do.”

For the Doing Layer:

Agreement with

Embedding values, leading/following, self-development.

May need change

Facilitating stakeholder engagement and participatory decision-making, are very similar.

Not completely agree

“Participatory decision making is not an action; you may want to add facilitating or encouraging.”

For the Believing Layer:

Agreement with

Shared purpose, self-awareness, “your emotional intelligence, your adaptive capacity”

May need change

Transformational mindset: “I would say that is a being rather than a belief. You have it. Your mindset is your being”

“Systems thinking that is more an approach, a way of doing things”

To add:

“I don’t see freedom of speech here” (the model).

DEI: Diversity, Equity and Inclusivity, as we are currently seeing, this has been “toning down in America. They don’t want a diverse workforce, they don’t believe in equality for everybody, and they don’t believe in inclusivity of people who would not normally be part of the workforce.”

“Maybe you want to add those in the believing because those are your values”

For the Visioning layer

At the beginning was confusing and thought the sentence: Thriving world for people, ecosystems and future generations to be our own definition of sustainability, and being an outcome that should be outside the layers, and the gerund did not quite fit the other active actions, since it was acting as an adjective. Before the explanation, however, she got the idea of it being the long-term visioning

To add:

Using colours or slightly larger letters.

4.2.5. Post explanation feedback from interviewee

After explaining the conceptual framework, she proposed the following changes:

- Long-term stewardship: the notion of being social responsible for the future. “Custodians of the future” or “custodians of the planet”
- Provide two models: One for Leaders and other one for followers, they deserve their own model, “they perhaps don’t have the vision and the depth of the beliefs and the being.” “you’re either a leader or you’re not. You can be a leader in your own life” “To be a leader doesn’t mean you have to be the CEO of a multinational” “But I would warn against trying to combine two different messages here.” as an example to who the difference she said “participatory decision making the leader should *facilitate* it. So, the leader’s doing is *facilitating* participatory decision making. The follower is *participating* in decision making.” “The followers do not embed values in their strategy. They should be aware of them.”
- New aspects: *Serving above self*: you can do that by: “doing things yourself, by donating your time and your skills. Even your money, your resources. But you can also do it by inspiring others. *Inspiring others* in your doing, by sharing your expertise and encouraging. *Networking* another doing, “Strong leaders *cooperate*, So, by working together we can achieve more”. Neighbours, *serve your local community*, “Please don’t go and save the planet at the expense of your own family and your own children”

- Empathy as a replacement for emotional intelligence, which goes more to a being. “If you have empathy, then I think you have the ability to make a contribution to being holistic sustainability leader and create a thriving world for the people, ecosystems and future generations.”
- “You can leave gaps ... make slices in it for people to fill in themselves” and explain this is not the seven steps to greater happiness... This is a personal journey, and we have put in some ideas here, but several segments that you can fill in for yourself that are relevant for you on your own journey” make them (circles) bigger with empty blocks in there that people can fill in for themselves.
- Defining what you mean by thriving, “that usually refers to finances, that is financially successful, you want to add more to it, like, it’s a healthy.”
- Include potential critiques, like for example finances, the “dirty word money” “somebody, somewhere, has got to be creating some money.” “I actually don’t believe in constant economic growth” “I don’t think we should be driven by Economic growth. Why? Why do we need? Why is it such a problem? That economic growth is slowing down? So what? Why don’t we just all consume a little bit less? Why don’t we actually all take a step back?” “be one step ahead of them (economist) and say this is our view on constant economic growth” ... “or you can even say for future research.” “The next people down the road can look at OK, what are the implications that our model has for the economic growth philosophy of Western civilization? Can we challenge that?” “you don’t necessarily include it but at least acknowledge that you’re not including it.
- Acknowledge the challenged of the applications “because big companies are only going to do it if they have to. As we are currently seeing “American companies are obliged to maximise profit” ... “somebody told me sustainability has to come second because they are obliged to create maximum financial value for their shareholders. That is their number one priority.”

As a final thought she thinks there is some hope with the next generation “your generation is going to make them change. Because you will not work for a company and I think that is going to be the ultimate conclusion. Your generation will not want to work for companies that don’t take holistic sustainability seriously. The current generation will only do it if they have to, but you don’t want people that are doing it because they have to” ... “You want people that will do it because they want to and because it’s fundamental to their essence to their being.”

4.3. Interview 3

4.3.1. Interviewee background

Having a degree in international business, our next interviewee currently works as a team leader for a Dutch international company, that sells consultancy and software, at the Swedish office in Gothenburg. Her team is responsible implementing new business in new countries that clients have business in. Beside this responsibility as a team leader, she also has an additional role where she is responsible for all business operations in Sweden. After building up the business in Sweden, she now has set up a team of over 20 employees. As this team can now work independently, she knows as the team leader, her task is done and its almost time to leave.

4.3.2. Interviewee's relationship with sustainability

From our interviewees experience, working for a software company, she's familiar working with sustainability scores and the EU regulations. She also receives requests from customers that ask for space in the software for these kinds of sustainability measures. However, when it comes to the measuring of sustainability factors, it's not just software but also the relevant systems needed. But she thinks that it's not just about the documentation, but this requirement of documenting makes companies think about sustainability, which is good.

Sustainability in the perspective of our third interviewee also lays a bit on the sustainable decision making. So, questions such as "What do we do when looking at the future, and what are we trying to achieve?" become relevant. This is particularly relevant in her context where the company she works for has 10-year plans, and the CEO can only sit for 10 years. But it's good that there are also people working on sub plans supporting the big plan, so you don't get caught up in daily operations that generate revenue, but there are also people involved in one year, five year and 10-year goals.

4.3.3. Interviewee's interpretation of being a leader

When asking whether she considered herself a leader, she answered not just a leader, but also a sustainable leader. She thinks it's important that it doesn't matter which kind of role you have in the organisation, leadership is just another role in the same organisation. The main aspect about her daily work is making decision that make sure other people can work. Her function includes being responsible for the year goals in Sweden, and the five-year goals on for example sharing knowledge. The layer of her managers is then responsible for the 10-year goals of the company. In that sense, she helps lead the people that are doing their daily jobs to get to the one-year goals, that then get to the five-year goals for the ones that she herself is responsible for.

Key is, you can only lead when people accept you, as a manager perhaps the same. She argues that she isn't a leader because of her job, she argues that she's a leader because people tend to follow her and like to follow her and enjoy working with her. In her team, she has people who she herself considers to be leaders because they are good at getting their point across, getting people to tag along to plans, and getting people to go in the right direction with him / her / them. In a nutshell, leadership is more on making sure that you are able to rally the groups together and get to a certain goal together.

To continue, it's important to know where it is you are going as a leader. When she became more of a manager, she realised that people trust you to have a vision and they will get a bit anxious if you don't have a vision. This is why it's important to have regular surveys or meetings to see if people are still pointing in the same direction, or if someone is losing track of the idea of the vision. When it comes to corporate level strategies, it's difficult to everyone in the company see the whole picture, so they need to blindly trust you as a leader. Have a clear vision, and make sure that you rally all the groups. She compliments this by adding the importance of knowing your people because it's incredible that people get anything done in a year: first quarter, everyone is sick; second quarter are all the free holidays; third quarter is summer holiday; and

fourth quarter is Christmas. So, if you know your people well, you know how to make things work in-between and get people together.

Furthermore, what's personally important to her as a team leader, is to establish a low entrance barrier. As a leader it's important for people to be able to come to you for everything and for those who do not feel comfortable about doing that, it's harder for her as a leader to help them, and thus also harder for her implement this strategy. This is why it's important to create that safe environment where people feel comfortable to say anything to you.

4.3.4. Interviewee's own interpretation of the HSL framework

The first aspect of the framework that caught the interviewees attention, was the participatory decision making. The reason for that is because, as a team leader, it's a challenging aspect to fulfil. About six years ago at the start of her career, she explains trying this participatory decision making, but that it was hard getting everybody involved and on the same line and that when that happens, you can still give people the feeling that you're not listening to them. The challenge in that is when you are responsible for making the final decision whilst half of your team is saying A, and the other half is saying B. If you as the responsible decision maker agree with A, then you could get the feedback from the people who said B that you didn't listen to them anyway.

Secondly, she also found it sometimes becomes harder to work towards goals. When looking at sustainability for example, it might not be as important to some people compared to others, and people tend to make decisions based on what they find important. This will influence the decision making for longer term goals. So, as a leader who wants to and strives to have everybody in her team on board in the decision-making process, it is a struggle.

The next remark touches upon authenticity. This is valued as being really important as a person. This also goes for being ethical.

An interpretation challenging within the framework given was in the positioning of self-development being in the circle of Doing instead of in the circle of Being. This challenge comes from the perception of 'doing' being something that is oriented externally. The other facets within the circle of Doing are interpreted as being externally oriented, whereas self-development is internally oriented within the self. It is understood why the concept of self-development is within the model, but just the positioning of this concept being in doing is being challenged.

Furthermore, the concept of continuously learning is important. Together with the circle of Believing, she remarks this being intrinsic again.

The applicability of this framework is interpreted as being potentially useful if you have a team and you present this to your team as you're training them as a team leader. So, to the team members, it's basically: to work on yourself to be authentic, think about the long term, and how to be ethical and consistent. As a leader, how do you show other people that you have those values as that is what will help them tag along in your vision. That is what will rally the troops as it were.

Concluding remarks, linking with the circles Believing and Visioning, is that the steps to take to go from the circle Believing to the circle Visioning is unclear. How the flow of going from Doing to Believing requires additional explanation.

4.3.5. Post explanation feedback from interviewee

After presenting the conceptual framework from a theoretical perspective, it was explained that indeed most if not all great leadership models start with Being. So that's that a confirmed good point to start with. She continues based on her own experience that with all leadership courses it's important to first look at the self, and what you find important authentically. Being authentic is vital as a leader as she warns that if you as a leader are not being authentic, and you cannot get that across to others in a good way, it could not only cost you a lot of energy, but people will also see right through that if you're not lucky. For this reason, it is being stressed that authenticity is in the correct position for its value.

With regards to ethical consistency, it should stay present in the model. Being ethical is personally important, she explains, but sometimes in business this is forgotten as money is a large influence on driving decisions.

As a team leader, she continues envisioning the practical implementation of this framework by imagining training this to her team. With this practicality in mind, there's still a confusion on the sequencing of the circles, arguing that going from inside out, it should logically be: Being, Believing, and then Doing. She mentions that there's possibility in training people in a sequential order by asking questions such as: "Who are you, who do you want to be?". Then the next suggested step is that you should first believe in the vision before you can do it, before you can develop yourself.

One potential risk, when it comes to continuous process of self-reflection and development, is that there's a lot of time spent on reflecting and less time on actually doing, because that is the last step. So, with that in mind, it would be good to see your vision come out from doing something first. Then the believing is more similar to a reflection. But it's important to make this continuous reflective process of believing, doing, and visioning visually clear in the model.

A comment that was made on emotional intelligence, is that that is something that can be trained. Some people are more emotionally intelligent as others, but it's challenging to make people aware of that. But then the question would be: How do you train emotional intelligence? But is that even the goal, to train emotional intelligence? Similar to other trainable facets, you can train to develop a transformational mindset, and you can train to be flexible and maintain harmony, and to think about the bigger picture. So, the other things are rather trainable, but emotional intelligence is a bigger challenge to how far that can be stretched.

The key takeaway from the choice of terminology in some rings, is whether or not it can be trainable. So, for instance, even switching emotional intelligence with empathy, still brings back to question with regards to how trainable that attribute would be. So, this aspect comes more across as something the framework wants people to be. Being attentive, however, could perhaps be trained.

She continues by explaining for her, as a team leader, she finds it important to be more aware in the present by for instance not fully booking her calendar. As she explains, by being more present in her heart, she has more space in her head to be aware of the people around her and what is happening with them. So as a leader, this is very important, to be present. So, because of that, being present comes closest to her which can be trained. If you are more present as a leader, you indirectly train yourself to know your people better too. As a present leader, you become more aware of when somebody is having a bad day, or something is wrong, because you have developed a better understanding or feeling of somebody's baseline on how they behave and are naturally.

At the moment during the interview, she realised the interconnected flow of the framework with regards to Being, then Doing, and after that Believing. She explains in her own words that Doing is something that a person does, it's not something that you have to do to other people, it's all centred around the person. This, she explains, makes sense to her, and falls back on the feedback given earlier to take that back. When participating in decision making, she explains, is something you do with the people outside. Following others, is also related to your external environment, as is embedding values in your strategy and stakeholder engagement. However, self-development is oriented towards the inside, but it is still an action. As this constitutes part of the results, both the original feedback she now aims to retract, plus this new insight, both contribute to what is the development and improvement of the HSL framework.

An important tip given by the interviewee after providing us with an anecdote, is when demonstrating this framework, it will be important to clearly explain where you are coming from as the authors of this framework. Cultural backgrounds, for instance, will have different nuanced perspectives on certain actions or concepts. So, by explaining the cultural context in which the framework was set, this could help improve the multi-cultural contextualisation.

Final concluding remarks from the interviewee emphasised the value of the practical side of this framework. If it is clear to people that this (HSL) is a continuous journey of self-awareness and improvement to reflect upon, it could be very practical. Other mentions include the thought process within this framework, is how to make each aspect trainable for people. This could be a framework for managers to work with.

4.4. Interview 4

4.4.1. Interviewee background

Our fourth interviewee, who is a trained social worker, has been working in the field of sustainability her entire life, since sustainability is such a broad field. At the beginning of 2000, studying a master's in criminology, she was working for the municipality for crime prevention, specifically the youth to help prevent teenagers from becoming criminals. Her working environment involved working with the person's families, the environment, schools and youth clubs too. In this work to prevent crimes from being committed, she was already tasked to look beyond just direct factors, but also environmental factors such as extra lighting and opening up areas. She explains that this work involves working with both persons' behaviour and the strategy of society. It's the social aspects of sustainability that are her core values and her work.

Besides early on being asked to work for the municipality she also worked in the private sector. During this latter function, she was positioned at a financial system as the head of sustainability in Sweden. In the eleven years of experience there, each of the branches in Sweden had at least one sustainability manager due to her work as head of sustainability. For insurance and banking companies for instance, the key purpose is to prevent accidents from happening. Which of course is good for society, good for the people and good for the company. It is however stressed that it took around 10 years to get the leader of the company to understand and to see the effects. In the beginning, she had the challenge that her sustainability work was only costing money, not saving or generating money. However, after 10 years, she was able to show how effective her work was and then nobody had negative comments on what she accomplished.

Even from early on, being one of the first managers in sustainability and having an academic background, she connected with her school to collaborate on research, and to get students involved in the projects. So, this led to research following projects for a number of years.

4.4.2. Interviewee's relationship with sustainability

Building upon her background, our fourth interviewee explains that sustainability has to do with your values and your thoughts around the meaning of life. Questions to ask to oneself around this are for instance: What is your purpose of walking around on this earth, genuinely? And what would you like to contribute to it? For our interviewee, it means something that makes people feel better, or make a better world somehow. She continues explaining that this is indeed a big question, but his big question can be broken down into smaller parts to make it concrete and possible to analyse what it is. Understanding which parts impact other parts, and how you can influence them in your role, either as a citizen, as a person or in the work that you do, it's about understanding how you can influence these parts positively. For her, this process is no different to her outside of her work as she does in her work, and this she says is very important to her.

Acknowledging and reflecting upon her own actions in her personal life, she expresses that she is aware of how she lives her life, but it's important she doesn't act from a bad conscience. With this, in the actions she takes as an individual, she doesn't give other people a bad conscience about things. But people should be aware about these kinds of things and how it effects your environment or the people around you. The point is, it's up to you to decide what your concerns are and being aware of conscious decision making.

4.4.3. Interviewee's interpretation of being a leader

After 11 years working in the insurance and banking sector, she became the leader of the biggest sustainability network of West Sweden. She was then a formal leader for five years and had employees, leading that network professionally. She explains that she also had a board at the time, and she was in charge of the activities and the reporting of everything for five years. This was also during the COVID pandemic, which were very hard times, also to work in as a leader being worried about the finances and the salaries for the employees. As her role being a leader, she had times where she needed to assess whether or not she could still afford to keep employees.

And now, for the past year and a half, she continues her work as a business advisor within sustainability growth for SMEs. But despite her formal leadership experiences, she states that everyone is a leader, whether it is that you are leading yourself, or others.

4.4.4. Interviewee's own interpretation of the HSL framework

After having looked at the framework, her first response was that for the flow of the framework to make sense to her, she would switch places between Believing and Doing. Acknowledging that it can be interpreted differently too, she emphasises this as being her first remark. The flow of visualising the framework in her first experience was that you have the values inside, and from those values you believe in things, and from there you are what you believe and that is why you take action. In so Doing will be affected by the Being and what one is Believing.

Moving on to the aspect of Visioning, she explains that visioning is also part of her beliefs and her being, which in turn affects her doing towards what she would have as her mission. Her conclusion on this explanation comes from the emphasis that the aspect Doing doesn't belong where it is currently situated in the framework.

When looking at further aspects, the interviewee strongly agrees with the ethical consistency part, however the term stewardship is unclear. When briefly explained the meaning, but not the interpretation, she mentions that in Swedish they would talk about the spine of a person, similar to the DNA of a person, what makes someone stand, be who they are.

The interviewee describes her visual interpretation of the layers as being an exponential development of one another. One facet plus the next leads to something exponentially greater than just the component individually.

However, a remark made about the aspect of harmony, is that if everyone remains in a state of harmony that is smooth and not a state of chaos, there won't be any innovation. So, she explains, seeking for problems to become a problem solver is important to consider due to this thought.

When she moves on to the circle of Doing, she agrees with what has been written. This is explained by when you know who you are and where you want to go, and what your beliefs are, it is easier to hold out a hand to cooperate with others. This will help collectively create something good, or great even, compared to what you would otherwise have been capable by just yourself. This is relinked to that exponential growth mentioned earlier. And this goes hand in hand with, as explained, that sustainability is not a one-man-show or one-woman-show, but it's about cooperation. This interpretation is being strengthened by an anecdotal example, of where a village that was slowly dying due to shops and entrepreneurs leaving. But as that was happening, more and more second-hand shops started to open. Where at first, one might think each second-hand shop is a competitor of the other, they instead worked together to create what is now a popular tourist destination for many second-hand places to visit in one place. This is a prime example of where cooperating and working together gives everyone a better situation.

Moving on, a term she believes is missing in the framework, is being humble. The reason why this term is important in this framework, is because the decisions you make today based on the information accessible at the time could be right at the moment itself, but then completely wrong the next day when there are new insights available. It is therefore important to have a

sense of acceptance that things change. Decisions made today could be the best today, but new actions might need to be taken based on new information that becomes available. That doesn't mean that the decision originally made was bad perse, but it's important to have that level of acceptance of that mindset.

4.4.5. Post explanation feedback from interviewee

After explaining our theoretical interpretation of the HSL framework, the interviewee contributes by asking whether we are familiar with the Inner Development Goals. These IDGs as she explains are a parallel system to the SDGs and relate to the transformation of each person to transform into a sustainable way of living. There are five different areas relating to caring for others, for the world and collaborating as social skills and enabling change. As this is a new phenomenon from recent years, she does mention that she was slightly surprised the IDGs have not been included in some of our course materials as they contribute with significant value to this framework. She contributes by suggesting for us to investigate these IDGs as it helps learn more about the topics we are researching, connected with the outer world and how we can develop.

Continuing, she still suggests switching places between believing and doing. But as in sustainability, there can be multiple interpretations that think differently, that doesn't mean that they are either right or wrong though. On another note, however, she stresses the importance to her of coming to a concrete level of communication. For some people who are in the sustainability business, they can be very soft, she explains. And, that these things are hard to put into figures and numbers. But since she has been trained with a financial and insurance background as the leader of sustainability there, she got to learn how to put sustainability into visuals and reports so that it became interesting for board members and other leaders of the company. The goal, she explains, is to work as smart as possible with the resources we have access to. This includes financial resources, but also people, and earth, the environment. Because this is what is easier to communicate to people who are less value driven as it is normally due to saving time and money when work is carried out smarter. The act of working smarter can be measured in financial terms or can be transformed into money, but it comes down to how you can work or do or act as smart as possible.

As a final remark, based on her work life experiences, that it is vital to share experiences and the way one looks upon things that come from different perspectives. She explains that if you only stick to likeminded people, you're never going to create progress. With that in mind, as a sustainability leader, you must have the strength to be the fish who swims against the stream. It takes bravery to be a sustainable leader and to have the conscious self-confidence of believing in the things you care about whilst also being humble and acknowledging when you were wrong and now see a topic from a new perspective. Being a sustainable leader, means you are the one speaking out, even when you get it wrong and get corrected, but that is part of being brave, and that is what makes a sustainable leader.

4.5. Interview 5

4.5.1. Interviewee background

Interviewee 5 is a current master's student of environmental studies and sustainability science in Lund University from Ecuador, with a background in entrepreneurship and finance. Besides his studies he works part-time supporting logistics processes for startup workshops and supporting the climate startup mapping project in Sweden. He is also involved in civic engagement, as it is the Global Shapers community an initiative by the World Economic Forum for Young people to participate in social impact projects in their communities. as a member of the Malmo Hub, they have focussed their effort give the Nordics perspective into the LCOY Local Conference for Youth, which aim to gather young people interested in climate action. This meeting's insights are sent later to regional conferences, which eventually turns to COP meetings.

4.5.2. Interviewee's relationship with sustainability

Even though sustainability has different meanings, and academics have to come to a conclusion, he dates back his sustainability relationship to ten years ago. He has been involved in several civil society organizations and doing volunteer work, as it is the global shapers in Malmo, but also in his city of origin Quito, the social projects he has worked on ranged from water and sanitation, human mobility and entrepreneurship. He also engages in education and sustainability for youth, and of course his current studies in Malmo university.

His final reflexion on this is that sustainability relationship is context based, for example in Sweden recycling or using public transportation, which is electric is very contextual and depend on the city/country you live in.

4.5.3. Interviewee's interpretation of being a leader

His perspective on being a leader is having agency within the sustainability ecosystem, which he feels he does, by being part of the organizations and teams of people who in an organized effort get together and aim to make a difference.

His definition of a leader is “person who can engage with and influence other people towards a goal” ... “this goal is definitely community oriented because it is the leader who has the agency mobilise people for some outcome”

4.5.4. Interviewee's own interpretation of the HSL framework

His interpretation began by relating framework beginning on a personal level and expanding to communal or institutional, however by not seeing institutional anywhere, keeps his analysis on an individual level.

His explanation of the being part relates to the core values and agrees on those values in sustainability “I think if you ask a person: What do you stand for in sustainability? They will share some similarities in their core values with the ones that have been mapped in the being part” and the questions the being part answer is “what do you stand for and why”.

The doing part answer the question what do you do? Which is influenced by what you stand for, and that means you take action. Very important, taking into consideration that you can stand for a lot of things, not always do everything, but you can choose within sustainability what to do. The actions there are very sustainability oriented: “participatory decision makings, leading following others ethically self-development, embedding values and strategy, which I think it's very connected to the previous being one and then facilitating stakeholder engagement” he concludes saying that the doing is the skills. His only concern is that they may be too general, relating to other areas outside sustainability.

For the believing part, is more related to the visioning, which can influence your believing, in here relates to the arrows, saying that believing is influenced not only by your values, but also what you do, and what you aim to do. In here change the categories of skills, putting them in the believing and the doing is activities that can be done. And gets reminded of this framework to the IDG (Inner Development Goals) framework. Something that caught his special attention is systems thinking “it's a very important aspect given how the interrelatedness of things is. And sometimes I feel that when you are not considering the very general interconnectedness of things that you may be losing the reasons why you want to be sustainable in the things that you do”.

For the visioning he explained at what you aim for, almost like a sustainable definition. Yet it allows for creativity to work on different ways within it.

Relating to the purpose of this framework he says, “I get that this is a framework for people who are interested in engaging with sustainability.” And shows how to develop the agency within the sphere of sustainability which has to start from the core value and “the skills on the believing part and then these combinations can illuminate on what different actions they can be doing that are mapped on the doing circle”

Lastly, before our explanation of the framework, he noticed the arrows and explained that you start with your values, but you still need a visioning, that is very general, but it can be personalized. Then, you go back from your values to your skills or what you want to develop. The last three arrows were not easy to understand.

4.5.5. Post explanation feedback from interviewee

First thing after explanation, is that the bidirectional arrows and what they mean makes a lot of sense. The interconnectedness and iterative process of this model aligns very well with a systems thinking.

Something that it is not understandable is the fact that the doing is right after being, before the believing. His position is that for the doing to take place, skills are needed before. His suggestion is to reorganize the layers, first being, then believing, then doing finally visioning.

Keeps in agreement on the iterative process of the framework, however the layer over layer was not that intuitive for him to get that. Even with the arrows there.

On another note, he agrees slightly with the sustainability interpretation we use for the visioning, yet stills feels it is very general, while you can use it you could also use “to your own

sustainability -oriented goals." And from there you chose other things in the other layers. His suggestion when working in sustainability goals is back casting which may be something we may want to apply in the framework.

In terms of suggestions for making in clearer: Have the title visible, use some colour, make it adaptable for other context, showing an example of the framework getting applied.

4.6. Interview 6

4.6.1. Interviewee background

Interviewee 6 is a PhD candidate in private international law from Brazil, with a background in international law and human rights. During his bachelor studies in Brazil, he paused several times to gain experience abroad, always with the goal of working with the United Nations. He has worked in Kenya, Norway, Shanghai, and Ireland, always connected to the Sustainable Development Goals.

After finishing his bachelor, he moved to California to study a master's in public international law and human rights. Since then, he has worked with the World Federation of United Nations Associations in New York, the OHCHR secretariat in Geneva, and on immigration-related work in Nepal. He later started a PhD that focuses on climate change litigation, ESG, and corporate social responsibility.

4.6.2. Interviewee's relationship with sustainability

Interviewee 6 thinks that sustainability is a complex and full of contradictions concept. He believes that while a lot of people and organizations talk about being green or reaching net zero, most of them do not really commit. He further argues that the technology already exists, like, for example, hydrogen energy, but it's expensive and companies are not willing to invest in it. In his view, money and sustainability don't go together.

He also thinks that governments, companies, and general society do not really know how to apply sustainability in everyday life. There are too many terms, too many rules, and little clarity on how to put them into action. From his background, he sees global agreements like the Paris Agreement with many loopholes, and it is missing key parts like human rights.

4.6.3. Interviewee's interpretation of being a leader

He does not consider himself a leader. he sees his role as helping companies avoid legal risks and supporting young people to understand ESG and sustainability topics better.

For him, even though leadership has many meanings, it is not about being an expert or holding authority but about learning and sharing knowledge. He thinks everyone is always learning, including professors, and that no one ever fully "arrives" at being an expert or traditional leadership. However, in traditional settings a leader relates more to being the boss or guiding others. He considers he is someone who prefer to support.

4.6.4. Interviewee's own interpretation of the HSL framework

Agree:

Interviewee 6 got the general intention of the framework "I get the idea yes for sure.". Yet as a person specializing in the legal and policy implications of sustainability, there are several aspects that were not clear to him.

Disagree/don't understand:

- The diagram is confusing "where should I start reading from visioning or being?", also it feels that it aims to achieve 100% of everything, but that does not work in reality.
- Vague core in the visioning "Thriving what in sustainability? And who is involved? I see people and ecosystems, what above governments, and which ecosystems?"
- Too general for the stakeholders asking, "Which stakeholders do you want to achieve?"
- Unclear concepts for him: "Ethical consistency – it means what?" "Justice and equity – which justice? Which jurisdiction?" "Authenticity – means what?" "Values in the strategy – which strategy?" "Self-awareness – about what?" "Transformational mindset – what is that?"

May need change:

- Add more sustainability related terms, not only in the title
- Using specific stakeholders like environmental stakeholders

To add:

- Using focus groups to get brainstorming

4.6.5. Post explanation feedback from interviewee

After explanation interviewee 6 had a better understanding of the framework and the purpose of it and commented that it has the potential to be applied in different fields. He still proposed some changes:

- He understands better the arrows but propose to change the design "You need to create an arrow... for example, start with being, touch doing, go to believing, then visioning."
- Make it clearer what is the goal of the framework and what is the vision of it.
- Create an acronym for the framework, since Holistic Sustainability Leadership seems too long

And also, some new concerns:

- How are you going to reach what you propose? He still comments on the broadness and trying to achieve too many things at the same time
- Even if he now understands some concepts, he wonders how you reach them, for example, transformational mindset
- In terms of practicality, he feels the framework is too dense to be applicable in a specific timeframe: How many days is this consultancy? 10 days? One month?"

- Adapt our expectations of reachability, suggest not beginning with government agencies, since that requires other aspects, such as diplomacy, and traditional structures.
- Prepare for critiques from different actors.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, we cover the correlations between the results (chapter 4) and the literature review (chapter 2). This means that the aspects mentioned by the expert interviewees are cross-referenced with the literature review and the articles of the referenced authors. In order to do that, we will evaluate each layer on its content, and place along with it some overall insights and design aspects. We will conclude with a refined conceptual framework.

5.1. Being

Here are our original inputs into the layer Being, first the table presenting aspects for Holistic Leadership, Sustainability Leadership and our interpretive Holistic Sustainability Leadership aspects:

Table 8 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion: Being

	Holistic Leadership	Sustainability Leadership	Holistic Sustainability Leadership
<i>Being</i>	Fostering a higher purpose for the greater good; The role of self in relation to your circle of control, influence and concern, and to those around you (integrity with self and unity with others)	Ethical commitment, Long-term thinking, Interconnectedness, Justice and Equity	Ethical consistency; Long-term stewardship; Justice and equity; Authenticity; Interconnectedness

Here is our original visualization:



Figure 8 Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework: Being

5.1.1. Content

For our originally proposed terms within the framework (see table 8), **long-term stewardship** (Fry, 2003; Ferdig, 2007; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011; Visser and Courtice, 2011; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019; Sajjad et al., 2024); **ethical consistency** (Ferdig, 2007; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Armani et al. (2020); Sajjad et al., 2024); **justice and equity** (Bundell and Little, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Sajjad et al., 2024); and **authenticity** (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011; Burns et al., 2015; Sendjaya et al., 2019) are considered important to the majority of interviewees. These confirm our theoretical interpretations derived from the literature review (see table 8) on Holistic Leadership and Sustainability Leadership.

Despite **long-term stewardship** generally being agreed with in terms of being present in the framework, there were, however practical suggestions made by several of the interviewees to revisit how long-term stewardship is being communicated in the framework. This is because this term was not clear at the initial viewing before being explained by us, as the authors of the HSL framework. An example of a suggested synonymous term to long-term stewardship, was along the lines of a spine, that which makes a person stand (Interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025). Another synonymous suggestion by interviewee 2 was replacing long-term stewardship with either custodians of the future, or custodians of the planet (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). These last suggestions can be linked more closely to what we interpreted in the literature review (Fry, 2003; Ferdig, 2007; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011; Visser and Courtice, 2011; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019; Sajjad et al., 2024).

Regarding the concept of **ethical consistency**, interviewee 1 suggested to remove this from the framework in order to make the framework more contextually adaptable (See chapter 4.1.4). However, most of our interviewees agreed with this concept being present where it is located in the framework, which also corresponds with our interpretation of the literature review.

Equity and justice required additional elaboration on the term. One comment received was the interpretation of justice, implying legal justice (Interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025). However, as interpreted from the literature review, justice and equity relates to societal sustainability issues where equity overrules equality and justice relates to the values that you as a person have towards ethical injustice, social injustice, awareness of wider sustainability, and personal dignity (Bundell and Little, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Sajjad et al., 2024).

The only suggestion we obtained to change regarding **authenticity** was adding "Personal" authenticity (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). Based on our theoretical findings, other responses, and the design of our framework, we exclude the introduction of specifying "Personal" authenticity as the being layer already represents personal/core values.

As for new aspects to add into the being layer, we have **empathy**, replacing emotional intelligence in believing (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025), **humble** (interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025) **self-confidence and sustainability** (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). To address the first aspect, we will keep emotional intelligence in the believing layer (see chapter 5.2.1.), and add empathy in our being

layer, since it is supported by Visser and Courtice (2011); Bundell and Little (2015); Armani et al. (2020).

With regards to being humble, and the interpretation of acknowledging when you are wrong, and change perspectives with new information (interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025), seems very in line with holistic leadership, in sustainability leadership it goes in line with being accountable (Visser and Courtice, 2011; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019; Armani et al., 2020; Sajjad et al., 2024), we deem significant to add the concept to our framework.

Interviewee 1 mentions feeling strong in your sovereignty and power, and that that is when someone feels confident enough to take action (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025). We interpret that as having self-confidence, which is also supported by interviewee 4 saying: it takes bravery to be a sustainable leader and have the self-confidence of believing in what you care about. From the theory, this is supported by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2011) and Armani et al. (2020).

For the aspect of adding sustainability, after revising our literature review, we could clearly see that having the term sustainability into the framework was significant (see figure 4 and figure 5). We will, however address this in more detail in the overall discussion (see chapter 5.4.2).

To conclude the discussion on the content of 'Being', we will keep the terms *ethical consistency*, *equity and justice* and *authenticity*, as they are originally in our framework, we will replace long-term stewardship with **custodian of the future**, add **empathy** and **self-confidence**, and introduce sustainability in other layers. (see chapter 5.6 for further discussion).

5.1.2. Place

All interviewees supported the layer Being to be in the centre of the framework, seeing that is from your values and core that you take action. This is supported by the visual interpreted adaptation of the circle of control by Covey, (2004) and illustrated by Schaffner, (2023) (see figure 3). In addition to this, an interviewee mentioned replacing emotional intelligence with empathy, to move empathy to the layer of Being (Interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). Due to this feedback being related to multiple facets, this argument has been covered in chapter 5.1.1.

After this feedback our framework begins to look like figure 9:



Figure 9 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion development: Being

5.2. Believing

Here are our original inputs into the layer Believing, we will take this layer before the Doing layer because it was a recurrent suggestion from our data collection process, see chapter 5.2.2 to see more details.

The following table presents aspects for Holistic Leadership, Sustainability Leadership and our interpretive Holistic Sustainability Leadership aspects.

Table 9 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion: Believing

	Holistic Leadership	Sustainability Leadership	Holistic Sustainability Leadership
<i>Believing</i>	Self-awareness; altruism; emotional intelligence; authenticity; harmony and flexibility;	Systems Thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptive capacity, openness, shared purpose, lead change	Emotional intelligence; System thinking; Adaptive capacity; Shared purpose; Harmony and flexibility; Self-awareness; Transformational mindset

And here is our original visualization (See figure 10):

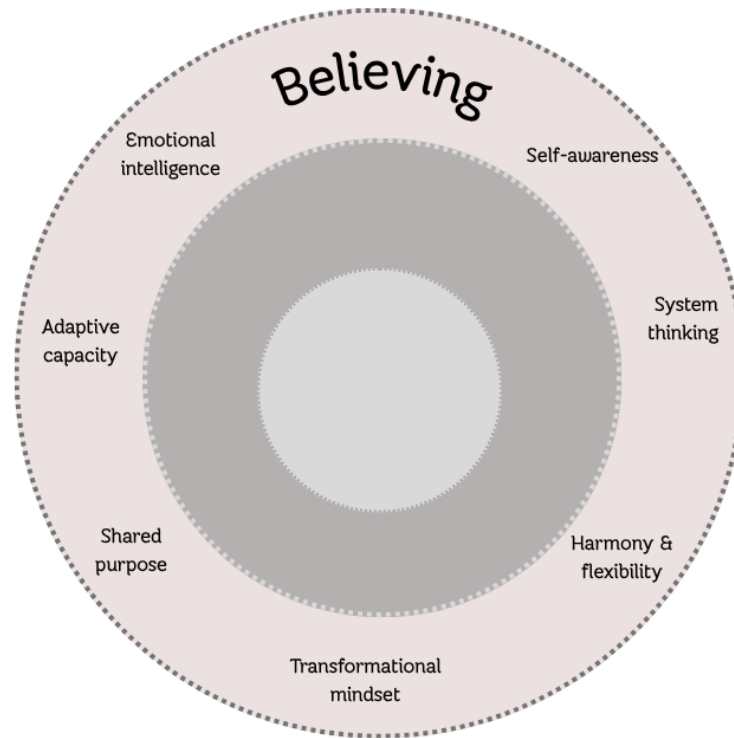


Figure 10 Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework: Believing

5.2.1. Content

Generally, most interviewees also agree with the theoretically interpreted concepts expressed in this layer. The concepts in agreement are *self-awareness* (Norris, 1992; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011; Visser and Courtice, 2011; Burns et al., 2015; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Sajjad et al., 2024), *systems thinking* (Ferdig, 2007; Visser and Courtice, 2011; Burns et al., 2015; Sajjad et al., 2024), *adaptive capacity* (Ferdig, 2007; Burns et al., 2015; Sajjad et al., 2024) and *shared purpose* (Ferdig, 2007; Galpin and Whittington, 2012; Bendell and Little, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019). Concepts of *harmony* (Fry, 2003; Quattro et al., 2007; Von Krosigk, 2007; Lips-Wiersma and Morrism, 2011) and *flexibility* (Fry, 2003; Ferdig, 2007; Quattro et al., 2007; Von Krosigk, 2007; and Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011), *transformational mindset* (Visser and Courtice 2011; Galpin and Whittington, 2012; Burns et al., 2015) and *emotional intelligence* (Cuatro et al. 2007; Von Krosigk, 2007; Visser and Courtice 2011; Armani et al., 2020) have some counterarguments.

Systems thinking, had one comment on its linguistic function (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). The interviewee suggested moving this term, but we will cover this in the placing part of Believing in more detail (see chapter 5.2.2).

The concept of *harmony and flexibility* in the framework was challenged by interviewee 4 (personal communication, April 2025): in order to innovate and change, there needs to be chaos, which cannot come from harmony. So, if everything is smooth and you only stick with likeminded people, progress cannot be made. This term harmony and flexibility, derives from

Fry (2003), Quattro et al. (2007) and Von Krosigk (2007). This is also supported by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2011) with regards to their unity with others. On the other hand, we find in sustainability leadership the concept of chaos, as something significant, Ferdig (2007) says for leadership, the importance is to navigate chaos, not to control it. But being aware and flexible to change course and embrace the relationship with uncertainty, chaos and emergence. Taking these practical and theoretical arguments into account, we consider amending the term *harmony and flexibility* to *unity through chaos*.

The concept of *transformational mindset* being present in the framework was not challenged. However, one interviewee commented on the need to specify what this was (interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025). Another interviewee, experienced in leadership, on the other hand, complimented this concept as being trainable (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). We have found this concept occurs multiple times in various sources as seen in our literature review, and the definition of this concept was not questioned by other interviewees. We therefore recommend for future readers who are unfamiliar with this concept to explore the sources referenced in our literature review.

As for **emotional intelligence**, we encounter two main contra arguments. First changing the concept to empathy and also changing place to 'Being' (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). Second argument comes from Interviewee 3 (interviewee 3, personal communication, April 2025), who mentioned the difficult trainability of this concept and suggested a change to attentive. However, Cuatro et al. (2007) and Von Krosigk (2007) bring this concept as being significant to holistic leadership and Visser and Courtice (2011) to sustainability leadership. Armani et al. (2020) brings the concept of emotional awareness. We conclude to keep the concept.

From further results, we receive suggestions to compliment this layer with having *a sense of direction*, which we interpret to having it already with the shared purpose, and differentiating leading and following others, and *change mindset*, as an interpretation of interviewee 4 (personal communication, April 2025) mentioning the importance of having a sense of acceptance that things change, we believe that this is already represented in a transformational mindset, where you are not only accepting change but also taking advantage of it and looking for it to progress.

However, the general interpretation of this layer slightly differs between interviewees. Interviewee 1 (personal communication, April 2025) and 4 (personal communication, April 2025) interpret the layer as things you believe in. Interviewee 2 evaluates the concepts in terms of creating sentences like "I believe in [concept]". Interviewee 3 sees that as something personally intrinsic, within the same lines of what you believe in, yet adding the insight and evaluating the concepts reflecting if they are trainable. Interviewee 5 considers the aspects to be skills. They evaluated the belonging of the concepts according to those interpretations. To make it clearer for what we intended to show, we will change the title from Believing to Developing, that way, the layer can be evaluated in terms of skills, trainable aspects that can be developed that are personally intrinsic, and the concepts there will make sense when creating sentences like developing [concept].

As for the concepts to keep in this layer we have: *self-awareness, systems thinking, adaptive capacity, shared purpose, unity through chaos, transformational mindset, emotional intelligence.*

5.2.2. Place

As discussed in chapter 5.2.1., several of our interviewees suggested changing the position between doing and believing (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025; interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025; interviewee 5, personal communication, April 2025). As concluded in said chapter, we will take this change into consideration and move Developing after Being.

In terms of concepts place, as seeing in chapter 5.1.2. we had the suggestion of changing emotional intelligence to empathy and to being, we believe the concepts are different, yet empathy was missing and added that concept in being and kept emotional intelligence in developing. From Interviewee 2 (personal communication, April 2025) we also had the suggestion of changing systems thinking to doing, since the interviewee saw systems thinking as an approach, and a way of doing things. With the changes in the title name, we believe ‘developing’ systems thinking, it is why we intended and decided to keep systems thinking in the developing layer.

Visually this concludes to (see figure 11):

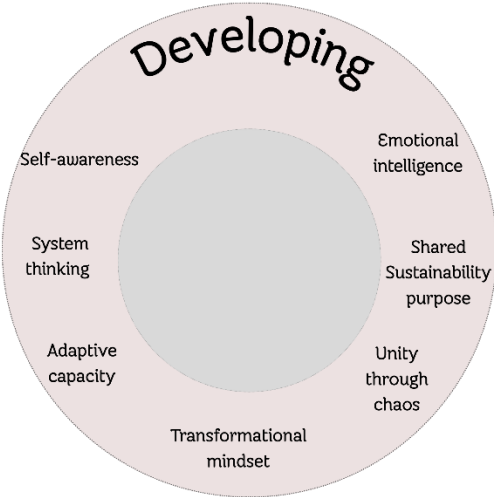


Figure 11 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion development: Developing

5.3. Doing

Here are our original inputs into the layer Doing, the table presenting aspects for Holistic Leadership, Sustainability Leadership and our interpretive Holistic Sustainability aspects.

Table 10 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion: Doing

	Holistic Leadership	Sustainability Leadership	Holistic Sustainability Leadership
<i>Doing</i>	Embracing and leveraging emotional intelligence, serving others, continuously developing oneself and others ethically, emotionally and spiritually;	Collaborative and Participatory Decision-Making, Embedding Values into Strategy and Culture, Facilitating Stakeholder Engagement	Facilitating stakeholder engagement; Leading/following others ethically; Self-development; Participatory decision-making; Embedding values in strategy;

And here is the original visual representation (see figure12):



Figure 12 Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework: Doing

5.3.1. Content

Generally, most interviewees agree with the concepts expressed in this layer: ***Self-development*** (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2011; Norris, 1992; Sendjaya et al., 2019), ***embedding values in strategy*** (Visser and Courtice, 2011; Burns et al., 2015; and Armani et al., 2020), ***participatory decision-making*** (Bundel and Little, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Armani et al., 2020), ***facilitating stakeholder engagement*** (Visser and Courtice, 2011; Armani et al., 2020; Sajjad et al., 2024) and ***leading/following others ethically*** (Ferdig, 2007; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Armani et al., 2020; Sajjad et al., 2024). Their explanations are very in line with

our interpretation; those are the actions you can take to develop a Holistic Sustainability Leadership process.

With regards to *self-development*, all interviewees either agree completely or did not have an argument against this action being in this layer. Confirming by both theory and practice the significance of keeping it.

Regarding the component of *embedding values in strategy*, we received the comment asking what the strategy is related to (interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025), suggesting this term be either explained or revised. Based on contributions from Visser and Courtice (2011); Burns et al. (2015); and Armani et al. (2020), to obtain sustainability outcomes in any setting, you need a strategy. And we argue to embed values in strategy and, depending on the context, each person would decide what their strategy is for them.

With regards to *participatory decision making*, the feedback from one of the experts is that in practice, participatory decision making is difficult to implement, and it does not achieve its intended results (interviewee 3, personal communication, April 2025). Our response to this argument is that this type of decision-making aims to reduce or eliminate authoritarian leadership styles, a recurrent argument in both holistic and sustainability leadership (Bundel and Little, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Armani et al., 2020). Further feedback included the implication that participatory decision making is not an action, as opposed to our intended categorisation implied. We will, however, take these insights into consideration to adopt a different decision-making process that still reduces or eliminates authoritarian leadership styles. Among the considerations and meaning that we include in this process are *collaboration* and *co-creation* (Ferdig, 2007; Bundel and Little, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Armani et al., 2020).

Additionally, one expert suggested revising the terms *participatory decision making* and *facilitating stakeholder engagement* (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025), as this was interpreted as having similar meanings. According to our literature review, these concepts are mentioned as separate actions, one being more internally oriented and the other more externally oriented (Armani et al., 2020). Other feedback on facilitating stakeholder engagement is to narrow it down to specific stakeholders, like environmental stakeholders, to help with the clarity (interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025). However, considering that we see sustainability from a holistic point of view, we will not apply the change into our framework, but we encourage people to adapt to their own context.

As far as *leading/following others ethically* is concerned, we received feedback that indeed the leader/follower roles are dynamic and interchangeable depending on the context one is situated in (sometimes you're a leader, sometimes you follow) (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025). However, one of the experts advises providing different models for each of those roles (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025), as each one of them deserve their own model, and the implications for each one of them is different. We explore this further in chapter 5.6.

As for new aspects to add into the doing layer we have: *Create a safe environment for your community or create a trusting environment* (interviewee 1, personal communication, April

2025; interviewee 3, personal communication, April 2025), this insight is supported by Armani et al. (2020), Burns et al. (2015 and Sajjad et al., (2024) and Nicholson and Kurucz (2019).

Additionally, *be present in your direct environment* was another suggestion to add (interviewee 3, personal communication, April 2025). This is also touched upon by Burns et al. (2015) and Sajjad (2024), this latter under their mindfulness individual mechanism. Furthermore, Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) argue in their research the importance of building trust with others and correlated whilst arguing self-awareness in relation to others focusses on how we are present, which in turn requires active engagement.

Set a good example through your behaviour (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025): we find a reference of this with Bundel and Little (2015) when explaining their definition of leadership: “Leadership is any behaviour that has the effect of helping groups of people achieve something that the majority of them are pleased with and which we assess as significant and what they would not have otherwise achieved” Therefore, as this input from practice compliments the theory, we can consider this feedback.

To inspire others and *encourage others* (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025; interviewee 2, personal communication, 2025), these terms are presented in our literature review, particularly mentioned by Ferdig (2007) (See table 2), similar additions include facilitate environments in which others can perform, or flourish is also supported by Sajjad et al. (2024) and Sendjaya et al., 2019.

The following suggestions regarding **voicing out, acting out, and communicating clearly** came forward by multiple interviewees (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025; interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025, interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025). We find agreeing concepts back in the literature review by Visser and Courtice (2011), referring to communicating vision, Armani et al. (2020), referring to the ability to engage, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2011), referring to expressing full potential, and Norris (1992), referring to being evaluated on communication skills. Therefore, as this input from the interviewees strengthens what was in the theory, we can consider this to be processed.

The remark by one of the interviewees to focus on the **impact you can make on your direct environment** (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025) directly corresponds with Covey (2004) as seen in chapter 2.1.2. By finding the emphasis on focusing the impact you can make on your direct environment, contributed by interviewee being in agreement with the theory, we can process this into our framework.

Interviewee 4 suggested adding to **share experiences and different perspectives**, in the framework, since this is an action, we will have the discussion of this concept on this sub-chapter. Ferdig (2007) says that “sustainability leaders share what they are learning along the way” and Burns et al. (2015) argue for the importance of bringing new and diverse ideas into your team and the powerfulness of sharing your own live experiences to make sure multiple perspectives are included. To include this idea into the framework we suggest the term **spreading wisdom**.

The additional remark to **live your values and your vision** (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025), can be interpreted as being authentic and embedding values in strategy, which are already present in the framework. We can confirm that these terms can be found back in our literature review. However, as this feedback for clarification was only provided once, and synonymous terminology is already present, we will not adopt the addition of living your values and your vision into the framework.

To conclude this chapter, we take into consideration the following concepts that will be integrated when necessary or redundant and also distinguish between actions from the leaders towards followers, and vice versa. (see chapter 5.6 for more details): *self-development, embedding values in strategy, co-creating, collaborating, facilitating stakeholder engagement, leading ethically, follow ethically, create a safe environment, create a trusting environment, be present in direct environment, set example through behaviour, inspire others, encourage others, voicing out, acting out, communicating clearly, make impact on direct environment and spreading wisdom.*

5.3.2. Place

Multiple interviewees suggested switching the position of Doing with Believing (interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025; interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025; interviewee 5, personal communication, April 2025). Their argument was that actions (doing) stem from who you are and what you believe in. With that interpretation, we can argue that the visualisation of Covey (2004) by Schaffner (2023) regarding the circles of control and circles of influence, can be altered to fit a clearer communicative visualisation of our HSL framework. To accommodate this freedom of visual interpretation, we can consider the processing of this contributed feedback.

Furthermore, one interviewee suggested moving self-development into the layer of Being (interviewee 3, personal communication, April 2025). However, after explaining the theoretical interpretation of the positioning, she understood that perspective and retracted her suggestion. We can understand the interviewee's initial comment that self-development is within your being. However, our intention to put it in doing is because it is still an action.

Here is our new visualization (see figure 13), where the layer is not on top layer, but are outside circle. The top of the circle are activities from the leaders, and the bottom the actions from the followers/community:

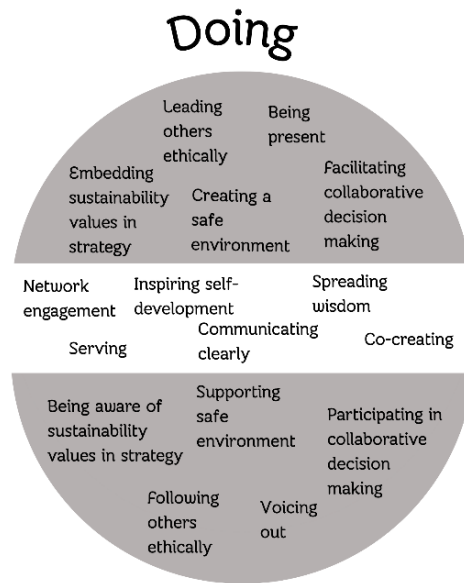


Figure 13 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion development: Doing

5.4. Visioning

Our original sentence for the visioning layer was “Thriving world for people, ecosystems, and future generations” on a last layer:



Figure 14 Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework: Visioning

5.4.1. Content

Concluding the final content discussion with the *Visioning* layer, two of the six interviewees (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025, interviewee 3, personal communication, April 2025) gave agreeing comments on the phrase “**Thriving world for people, ecosystems, and future generations**” as this clearly referred to the long-term sustainability vision. Other suggestions and comments were provided for further development.

After having reflected on the framework for some time, two interviewees were unclear with the definition of the phrase “**Thriving world for people, ecosystems, and future generations**”. In particular, the concept of “Thriving”. One suggestion received, stemming from the perception that “Thriving” is usually related to economically thriving, was to enhance this with a reference towards a healthy world or healthier world (interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). This feedback is in line with the greater purpose of sustainability, in which the collected theory relates to Holistic Sustainability Leadership (chapter 2).

A request for further explanation came from interviewee 6, suggesting that the core of the phrase within this layer was vague. Questions such as “Thriving what in sustainability?” and “What about governments, and which ecosystems?” (interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025) were asked in response to the vagueness. Despite these being relevant questions for needed clarification in practical contextual settings, we worry that by filling in these questions on behalf of future Holistic Sustainability Leaders reading this framework, that we reduce the applicable relevance of this framework in multiple contexts. Thus, risking the limitation of its design. Therefore, we are inclined to not adopt the need to specify these details in the framework.

On the opposite side of the previous context, referring the need to specify the statement presented within this layer, interviewee 5 refers to the statement almost as a definition of sustainability. The interviewee continues by that it is phrased in such a way, however, that it still allows for creativity to work with (interviewee 5, personal communication, April 2025). This implies that this statement does not limit the reader to its applicable interpretations but still steers the reader towards a sustainability purpose.

In relation to the freedom of interpretation given in the previous feedback, interviewee 1 suggested removing the phrase “Thriving world for people, ecosystems and future generations” in its entirety. This with the suggestion for readers to fill in the vision for themselves, based on what their passion is (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025). To compliment this chain of thought, the same interviewee continues suggesting that this empty space, if required to have something, to contain “Purpose” as it can be related to the TBL of sustainability (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025). Despite acknowledging that this replacement is not as grand as the original statement proposed by us, the value is in that the purpose can be something important the reader can identify with when left more open to interpretation. With these comments in mind, whilst remaining connected with the literature review, we consider changing the phrase “Thriving world for people, ecosystems, and future generations” into “Achieve transformative and holistic Sustainability change”.

This realisation links back to what the research seeks to provide (see chapter 1.3) a practical framework for current and future leaders to achieve transformative and holistic change by

analyzing the evolution, foundational principles, and possible applications in the real life of HSL. Yet we encourage practitioners and readers as suggested by interviewee 5 and Interviewee 1 to adapt it to the sustainable purpose of their process, community or project.

5.4.2. Place

Regarding the designing of the contents in the layer Visioning, Interviewee 2 suggested using colours or slightly larger letters for Visioning (Interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). Interviewee 4 however, commented regarding the position of the Visioning in respective to the other layers. Interviewee 4 explains that Visioning is also part of her beliefs, which in turn affects her actions toward a personal mission (Interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025). As this feedback impacts the communication and interpretation of the framework to make it clearer to understand, we can take this feedback into account for developing the framework further.



Figure 15 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion development: Visioning

5.5. Overall design

5.5.1. Arrows

Finally, in order to complete this HSL framework now that we have the contents discussed, we see that some visual aspects need to be revised. Despite the arrows being bidirectional, and the meaning for that making sense (Interviewee 5, personal communication, April 2025) other interviewees either did not fully agree, or suggested changes.

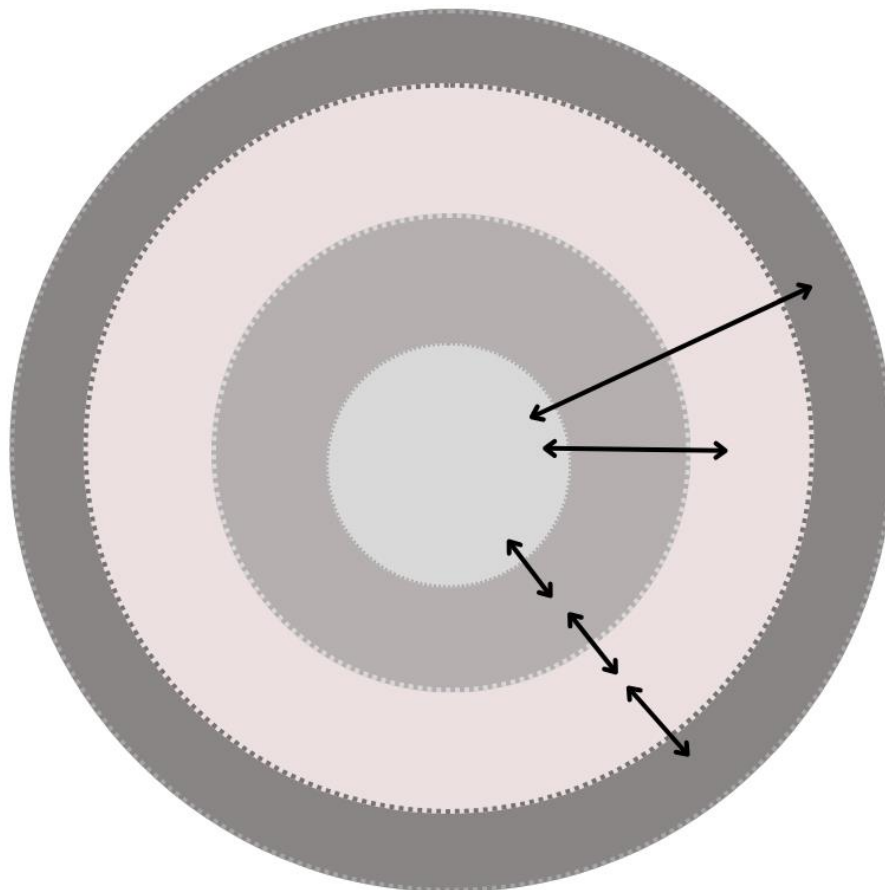


Figure 16 Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework: Arrows

Regarding the current version Interviewee 1 explained that the interpretation of this framework being static. As we have explained earlier (see chapter 2.4), the aim of the visual representation is to imply a continuous dynamic process within the framework. With that feedback in mind, however, the interviewee did add that because of its static nature, it could be more useful for current leaders who are unaware of this topic (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025). As we aim to improve the visualisation of this component, we will take this feedback into consideration to improve the dynamic process that can be interpreted within the framework.

The interpretation commented by Interviewee 4 suggested that one component or layer in addition to the next component or layer would lead to an exponential development with the framework ($1+1=3$) analogy (Interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025). This interpretation can certainly be interpreted as complimentary to the intended design. However, this being visually clearer for others to also interpret the framework in a similar manor is not the essence of the framework: aiming to visualize a dynamic process of leadership. For this reason, we will not develop upon the visual clarification of this interpretation in more detail but encourage readers to feel free to interpret this freely to encourage readers identifying themselves within the framework and making it their own.

Interviewee 2 commented that the use of arrows and where to begin in the model was unclear (Interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). Interviewee 6 suggested something that

could assist in that by creating an arrow that touches each word represented in each layer (Interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025). Understanding that the intended visual representation of the arrows implying a dynamic process being unclear, and that this being clearly represented in the framework is of high importance to the Holistic Sustainability Leadership process, we will take this feedback into account when developing the framework.

There is another piece of feedback that would influence the design of the framework and the relationship with the arrows. This will be addressed in chapter 5.6; however, Figure 17 shows how the arrows look within the whole framework.

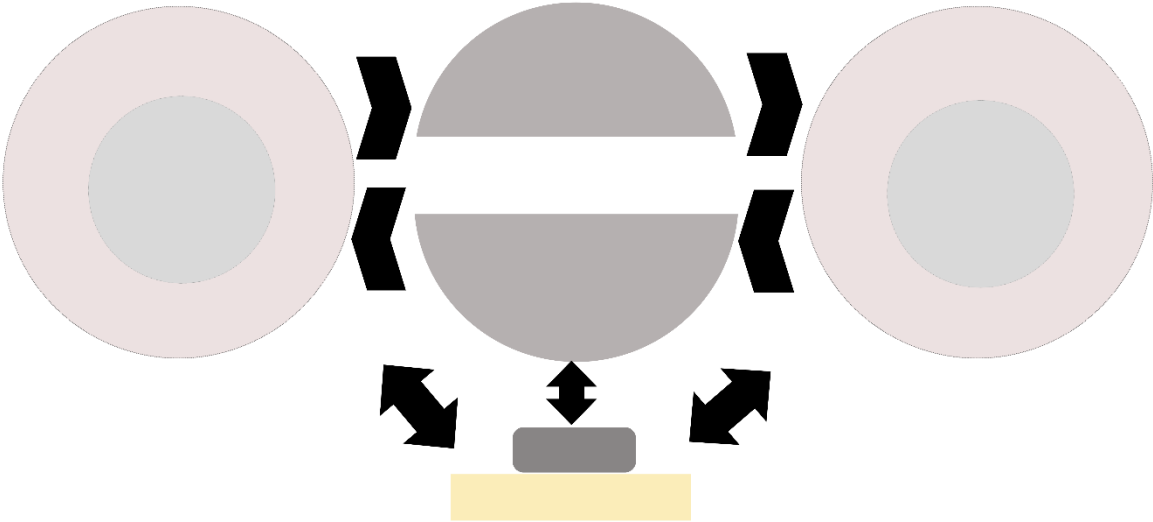
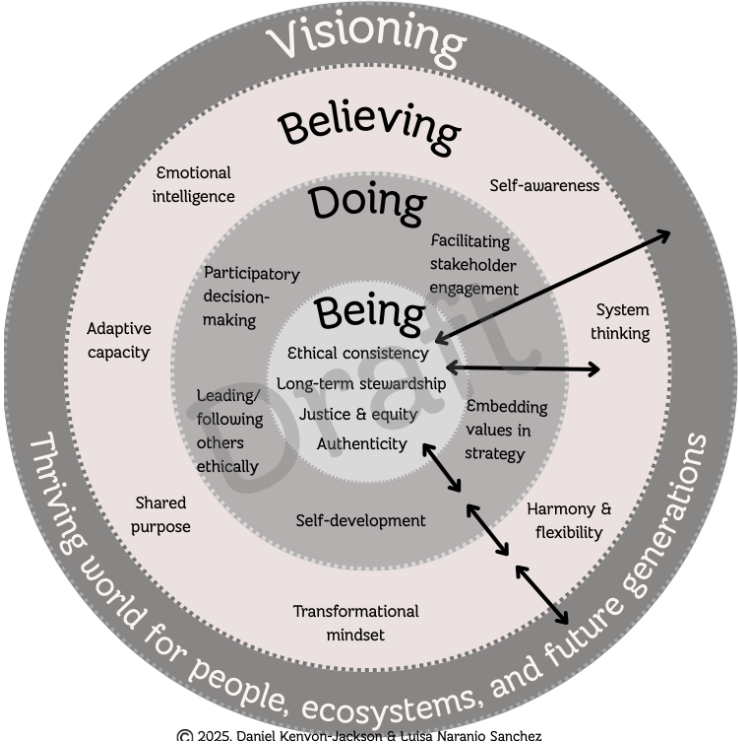


Figure 17 Holistic Sustainability Leadership discussion development: Arrows

5.5.2. Visual representation



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Figure 18 Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework: Visual Representation

Feedback that was in agreement with the current framework included the use of gerunds: Being, Doing, Believing, Visioning (Interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). In addition to this, Interviewee 1 complimented that the overall dynamic representation of the subject within the framework is considered something really useful (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025). Interviewee 1 continued that the framework can be used in a way to awaken a level of awareness in people who have not given this subject much thought (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025). Interviewee 6 agreed with the intended applicability of the framework in various fields or contexts. As these comments are currently represented within the framework, we will continue to consider maintaining these comments as the framework develops.

One of most significant points of feedback was regarding the use of one model for the roles of both leaders and followers. The suggestion was to have two models (Interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). This was seen as being particularly necessary for the Doing layers, since different actions are expected for each role, according to interviewee 2 (personal communication, April 2025). As an example, the interviewee mentions that you expect a leader to *facilitate* participatory decision making but the follower is doing the *participating* in decision making.

Continuing with not fully agreeing feedback, interviewee 5 and interviewee 6 explain that the layer over layer design was not intuitive, and that it was unclear to them where to start. This feedback strongly suggests that in order for the framework to be more visually intuitive to follow and understand, the overall layering of the framework will need to be developed more clearly. This will be taken into account for the development of the framework

Interviewee 6 continued with other specific feedback. Beside suggesting an acronym as a title for the framework (Interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025), it was also suggested that the framework was too dense to be applicable in a specific timeframe. The first remark we can take into consideration. The latter, however, is hard to test and apply into the design to process this comment.

In terms of wording, interviewee 4 talks about community instead of followers. In leadership theory, there is often the distinguishment between leaders and followers. The interpretation of using community instead of followers invokes more inclusivity. However, as this is still a relatively new conceptual addition to the field of leadership, we may consider adopting the use of both follower and community in the framework.

With regards to suggested changes, a number of interviewees emphasized suggesting the linking of Being and Believing together as this is intrinsic, and having those components then linked towards the aspect of Doing (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 2025; Interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025). As this can be theoretically substantiated by Covey (2004) and Schaffner (2023), linking the visual components of Being and Believing into something that can be controlled, before relating into what can be influenced.

Interviewee 4 suggested including the goal in which to work as smartly as possible with the resources accessible (Interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025). This was argued to

make the framework more tangible and measurable for those who are less values driven as it is often related to saving time and / or money. Despite understanding this perspective, we cannot immediately theoretically substantiate arguing for this being processed into the framework. However, we do strongly encourage readers to apply this framework in their situation as they feel fit.

In line with this, Interviewee 2 suggested leaving gaps in the framework for readers to fill in for themselves (Interviewee 2, personal communication, April 2025). As we cannot theoretically argue implementing this being adopted in the framework, we do however encourage readers to apply their interpretations.

Further comments included having the title more visible (Interviewee 5, personal communication, April 2025), to include more Sustainability concepts (Interviewee 6, personal communication, April 2025). These comments contribute to the theme and the communication of the framework, so we will take these comments into consideration in the development of the framework. See next chapter for final visualization of the new conceptual framework.

5.6. Development of HSL 2.0. Framework

Based on all the above-mentioned discussions, we conclude to develop the framework with new visual and content-related components (see figure 19).

The new visual differentiates between a leader and a community/follower, who each have an inner Being as agreed in chapter 5.1.2. with the same concluded values in chapter 5.1.1. ethical consistency, equity and justice, authenticity, custodian of the future, empathy and self-confidence. As we discuss, the issue between leaders and followers lies more in the actions they take in the leadership process.

They both have a second layer that was changed in terms of concepts from Believing to Developing (see Chapter 5.2.1), and the place from the third layer to the second layer (see Chapter 5.2.2) to show the responsibility of the person's journey within themselves towards others. In this layer, we acknowledge that there could be some differences in the level of development of the attributes between leaders and followers, yet the ideal attributes are to be developed by both roles. The ideal attributes in Developing are as concluded in chapter 5.2.1. self-awareness, systems thinking, adaptive capacity, unity through chaos, transformational mindset, emotional intelligence and shared *sustainability* purpose, taking into consideration the feedback we had on adding sustainability terms, we believe the sustainability purpose reinforces the idea of sustainability development, which we, in this research, and those who aim to apply this framework, are aiming for.

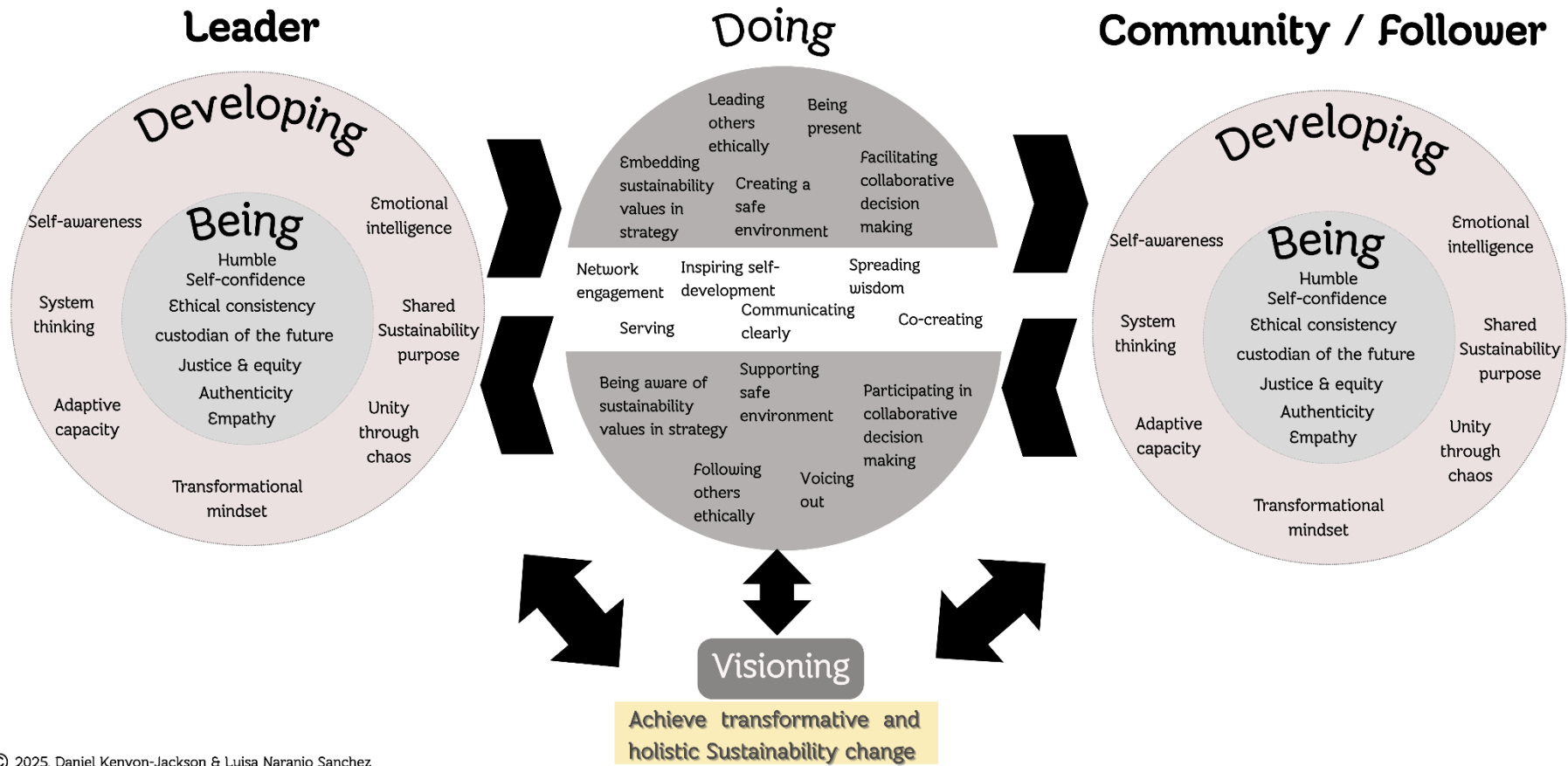
We changed the doing layer to a new place, creating a connection between the leader and the follower. Upper actions relate to actions that are specific from the leader to the follower, represented also by the direction of the arrows. The related actions are: Embedding sustainability values in strategy, adding also in this place the word sustainability since we aim for those values to be sustainability-oriented, leading others ethically, creating a safe environment, being present, facilitating collaborative decision making.

The lower layer represents the actions specific from the followers to the leaders, which mirror the actions from the leader: Being aware of sustainability values in strategy, following others ethically, supporting safe environment, voicing out, participating in collaborative decision making.

In the middle of the circle, there is a way with actions that we believe both ideal holistic sustainability leaders and followers should engage: Serving, network engagement, communicating clearly, inspiring self-development, co-creating, and spreading wisdom. This goes in alignment with the overall criticism from Bundell and Little (2015) of taking a step back from the 'hero' position of leaders and the burden they seem to carry around in the overall outcome of the process, when in fact, followers are also responsible and certain actions are taken in both roles.

Finally, for the visioning, we took into consideration the feedback from interviewees 1 (personal communication, April 2025) and 6 (personal communication) on seeing it as the purpose of the framework. We also added a box-like and different light colour, to encourage practitioners to add their purpose in their holistic sustainability leadership context, also taking into account interviewee's 4 (personal communication, April 2025), and interviewee's 5 (personal communication, April 2025) feedback.

Figure 19 on the next page shows the final version of our proposed HSL 2.0.



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Figure 19 Holistic Sustainability Leadership 2.0 framework developed

6. Conclusion

6.1. Research questions and Purpose

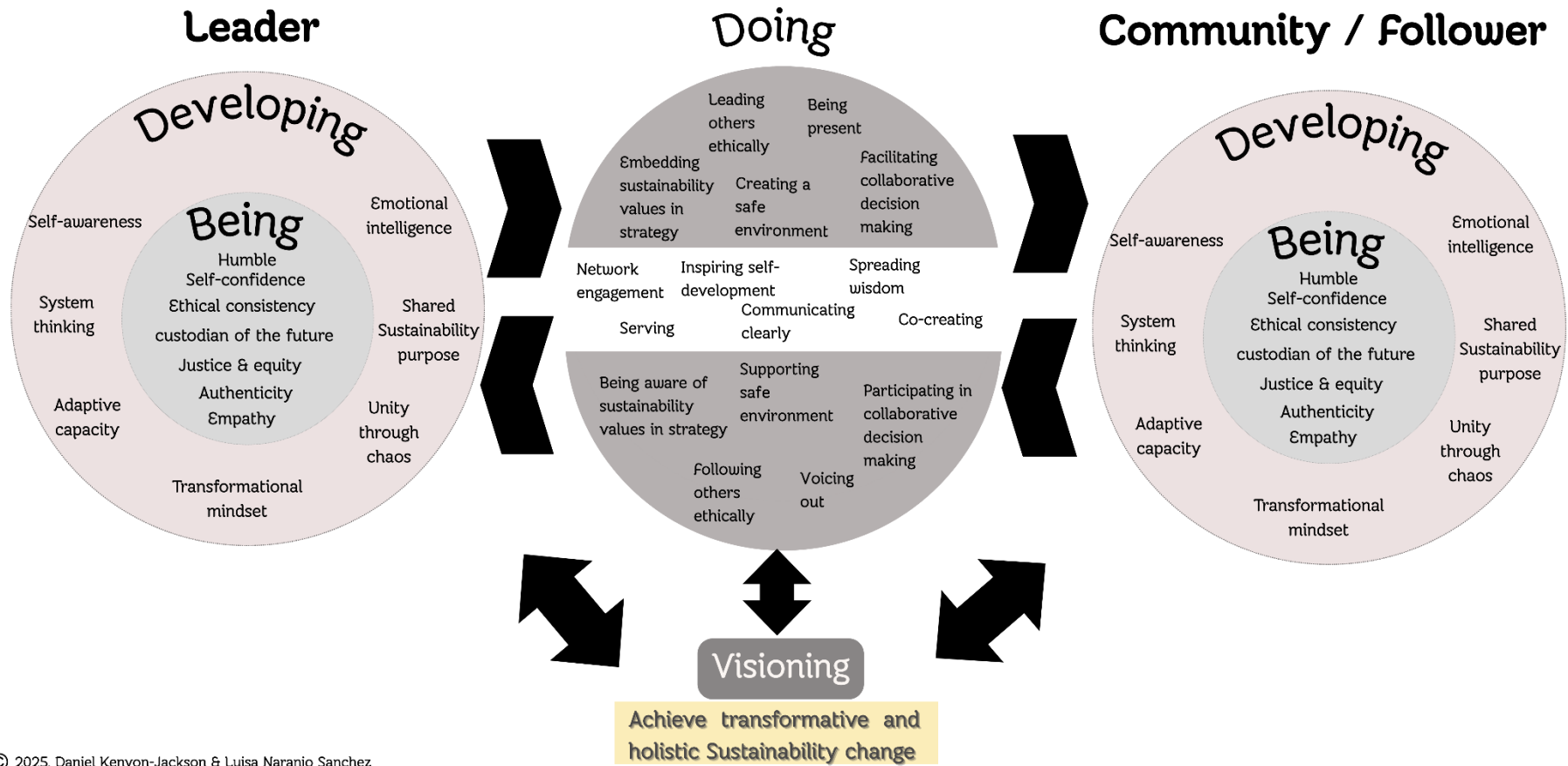
As this thesis comes to a conclusion, we revert back to the research questions posed and the purpose presented in chapter 1.

After having explored the phenomena addressing the need for Holistic Sustainability Leadership, the concepts deriving from Holistic Leadership and Sustainability Leadership interconnected sought to provide a bridge that would fill the gap between theory and practice.

We discovered the meaning of Holistic Sustainability Leadership by exploring the development within Holistic and Sustainability Leadership. Key learnings from these developments include the level of self-awareness in relation to the being aware of yourself in connection with others deriving from Holistic Leadership; and the systems thinking, collaborating and long-term orientation deriving from Sustainability Leadership.

With this in mind, the key attributes in existing theories that fall under Holistic Sustainability Leadership are being with ethical consistency, long-term stewardship, justice and equity, authenticity; doing through facilitating stakeholder engagement, leading and following others ethically, self-development, participatory decision making, embedding values in strategy; and believing further through emotional intelligence, system thinking, adaptive capacity, shared purpose, harmony and flexibility, self-awareness, and transformational mindset. These components interconnected lead to the Visioning transformative and holistic sustainability change.

The developments that led to the need for Holistic Sustainability Leadership provided the theoretical foundation for developing the Holistic Sustainability Leadership conceptual framework. After discussing with six experts to further develop on the applicability and clarity of the framework, we conclude the interconnected process that develops and evolves between the leader and the follower/community. The practical framework contains theoretical concepts which got confirmed by our experts, and concepts which lifted the original theoretical interpretations to make it more practically applicable. After all this process, we derived to defining the ideal Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework as follows (see figure 20):



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Figure 20 Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework

6.2. Theoretical implications

By exploring the existing theoretical developments within Holistic Leadership and Sustainability Leadership, we pose to compliment the field of research in leadership and sustainability by introducing new theoretical connections, leading to the development of a conceptual framework. We hope the theoretical connections and conceptual frameworks the foundation for future research in this field to grow upon and to increase awareness in the academic community.

Our study also contributes by proposing *Holistic Sustainability Leadership* as an interconnected framework that poses the leader and follower as active roles interdependent of each other, with shared key values, skills and actions. Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership models or siloed focus ones, HSL highlights complexity, paradox, and the always-changing environment to achieve sustainable change. This theoretical positioning calls for a broader conversation in leadership studies that goes from static models toward dynamic, relational, and emergent paradigms.

Another implication is the conceptual clarity the study introduces to the notion of holistic, which often seems very abstract. With our framework, and the introduction of the 4 layers: Being, Developing, Doing and Visioning, that not only are categories, but interdependent layers of leadership practice that evolve together. The bidirectional arrows between the layers, shown in the framework, reflect how transformation happens as an ongoing and evolving process both within individuals and in the way organisations or projects develop. We see this as a contribution to theory, since the visual and structural elements of the model help bring clarity to how inner and outer dimensions of leadership are connected, especially when navigating the complexity of today's sustainability challenges.

6.3. Managerial implications

The Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework provides managers, HR professionals, team leads and consultants with a structured yet flexible tool to support or implement real sustainable change in their organisations, projects or communities. With the incorporation of the four spheres: Being, Doing, Developing, and Visioning, into sustainability leadership development initiatives, organisations can get deeper value and significant collaboration among their teams. As an example, exercises promoting *Being* or *Developing* can support self-awareness and ethical clarity; on the other hand, *Doing* and *Visioning* can shape strategic thinking among all participants and share purpose-driven actions. In this way, the framework can serve both for the individual transformation and also for the alignment of the teams around long-term sustainability goals. As organisations are constantly facing complex and interrelated challenges, this holistic approach can help build leadership cultures that are resilient, adaptable, and genuinely committed to systemic change.

Other uses of the framework can be as a complement to internal recruitment processes or for training team members by creating an awareness of HSL and ensuring alignment within the organisation. In coaching or consultancy settings, it can help guide individuals to become HSL practitioners and support other organisations to achieve holistic sustainable development. In

addition to this, we can also see this framework having an educational function in leadership training programs.

6.4. Future research

For future research, we advocate the testing of the framework in practical settings to evaluate, refine, and quantify its practical value. Therefore, a cross-sectional study conducted across different sectors, industries, or cultural contexts would benefit the further contextually independent application of the framework to see whether the intended multi-contextual applicability is achieved.

On the other hand, while this thesis used a qualitative case study approach supported by semi-structured interviews, future research could try different ways of studying the topic to help deepen and broaden the understanding of Holistic Sustainability Leadership. As an example, further research could combine qualitative interviews with surveys or other types of assessments, like behavioural, that could provide a more complete picture of how the different aspects of HSL appear in practice. It could also be interesting to explore how the framework works over time, for instance, using a longer-term study or even an experiment, exploring how a leadership development program using this framework influences individuals and organisations in the long term.

During the empirical results, we were suggested to investigate the IDGs (Inner Development Goals) framework (Interviewee 4, personal communication, April 2025). As this IDG was not discovered during the literature research, but still potentially relevant as recommended by the expert, we advocate that future researchers find relevant links between our framework and frameworks such as the IDG, in order to further develop and build upon the research topic of Holistic Sustainability Leadership.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Interview guide – Master thesis: Validating Holistic Sustainability Leadership

(Note: Ensure that the interviewee is comfortable with the questions and is aware they can choose to skip any questions they do not want to answer. Respect the interviewees time and confidentiality.)

Introduction:

“Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. The purpose of this interview is to gather insights on your expertise, with a specific focus on Sustainability, Leadership practices, and the Holistic aspect of Sustainability Leadership practices. Your responses will help in understanding the practical implications of Holistic Sustainability Leadership, and help validate and/or improve theoretical knowledge applied into practical settings by gathering expert feedback on the clarity, relevance, and applicability of the proposed Holistic Sustainable Leadership framework.”

Consent Reminder:

“Before we begin, are you comfortable with us recording this conversation for the purpose of analysis? The data will be anonymized in our thesis.”

“Respecting your valuable time, if you want, we welcome any additional reflections or feedback after the closing question if you have more time available for us.”

A. General

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself
2. What is your relationship with Sustainability in your daily life
 - a. Work:
 - b. Other:
3. Would you consider yourself a leader by your own interpretation in either of these settings?
4. In the previous question, what was your interpretation of a leader when giving an answer?

B. Interviewee Interpretation: Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework

1. “When you look at this model, what is your initial interpretation?”
2. As you see this framework, could you in your own interpretation explain what you see and how it works?
 - a. If the person struggles with an answer: *Prompt if needed: What do you think each layer represents?*

C. Interviewers (Theoretical) Interpretation: Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework

1. We present our (theoretical) interpretation of the HSL Framework.
2. Being: Core values
3. Doing: Practices
4. Believing: Relation to external
5. Visioning: The bigger picture

Both leaders and followers have these 5 elements in a dynamic process (arrows).

D. Collaborative Building: Holistic Sustainability Leadership framework

1. “After our explanation, what is your intake?”
2. “What would you change to make it more applicable or understandable?”
3. Would this model be useful / applied in your field of work?

Closing:

Thank you for sharing your insights and experiences. Your perspectives and feedback are invaluable for enhancing our understanding of Holistic Sustainability Leadership in practice, and improving the practical relevance of our theoretical framework. Are there any additional comments or insights you would like to discuss before we close?

Appendix 2. Sample Email for interview invitation

Email to send to interviewees:

Subject: Interview invitation for Master Thesis: Holistic Sustainability Leadership

Dear Sir / Madam,

We, Luisa and Daniel, are writing our Master thesis at Halmstad University for the program Strategic Entrepreneurship for International Growth specialization Strategic Leadership.

As part of our research, we have developed a conceptual framework on Holistic Sustainability Leadership. As we consider you an expert within our field of research, we would be excited for the opportunity to interview you. The purpose of this interview is to validate from practitioners, being entrepreneurs / consultants / CEOs / Leadership experts / Sustainability experts / anybody going through the sustainability journey, whether our conceptual framework on Holistic Sustainability Leadership has practical value.

Your responses will contribute to understanding Holistic Sustainability Leadership, and help validate and/or improve the clarity, relevance, and applicability of the proposed Holistic Sustainable Leadership framework.

The interview is expected to take 45-60 minutes and will take place online (Microsoft Teams). We have proposed some optional dates and times, for which please click this [link](#) to select your preferred availability or copy paste the following URL in your web browser:
<https://calendly.com/lfnasa23/interview>

With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed for our data analysis purposes alone. Results will be referred to anonymously.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for your time and we look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Luisa and Daniel

Contact information:

Luisa Naranjo Sanchez
luinar23@student.hh.se
Daniel Kenyon-Jackson
danken23@student.hh.se

Appendix 3. Sample LinkedIn message for Interview Invitation

Hi,

I hope you're doing well! I'm currently writing my master's thesis with my colleague Daniël at Halmstad University, where we're exploring Holistic Sustainability Leadership—looking at how sustainability and holistic leadership practices connect in real-world settings.

I've seen some of your posts on sustainability, and they're truly inspiring. We were wondering if you'd be interested in having an online interview (45–60 min) to help us validate a framework we've developed as part of our research. Your insights would be incredibly valuable in assessing its relevance and applicability in practice.

If this sounds interesting, I'd be happy to share more details and a link with suggested available time slots. Thanks so much for your consideration, hope to hear back from you!

Appendix 4. Familiarization colour coding

Interviewee 2 7:08

Yes, **I'm a leader in my own company.**

We are co-owners, but I think the other owners, my husband and my eldest son would probably admit that I'm the leader of the company, not least because I founded it on my own 20 years ago and have **built it up** and they have joined later and certainly within Rotary. I'm an international leader. I regularly **give presentations** to in an international setting on **girls empowerment issues**, I'm currently **coordinating a major event** on girls empowerment and the impact that Rotary has, so the impact of Rotary on both **environmental issues** and **girls empowerment issues**, and also the **keynote speakers are empowered young women** and **I want to give them the floor to actually show how much impact empowered girls can have.**

And yeah, the fact that I'll be governor of [REDACTED] for Rotary International, I think is a very important leadership role that I will have **and the responsibility that goes with that**. It's a four year role. So at the moment I'm the governor nominee next year, I'll be governor elect. Then I will be the governor for one year and the final year I will be the immediate past governor.

And in that whole period, I sit on the regional Commission that **oversees all the activities in our area**, our district and I'm also part of the national [REDACTED] Government or Governor's board for the Rotary activities in the whole of [REDACTED]

Luisa Fernanda Naranjo Sanchez 9:08

Yes. Perfect. So, for the previous question, what was or how did you use the word leader? What is your interpretation when giving your answer?

Interviewee 2 9:25

I believe I have a responsibility to share my talents, my skills, my network, to inspire others.

And to **encourage them to achieve more than what they could do if they didn't know me**. So I want to **lead them to become more of who they could be in themselves**. So I don't make a magic wand. I don't have a magic wand, but I believe a good leader **inspires others to realise their own potential.**

Appendix 5. Thematic Comparison Across Interviews

Table 11 Thematic Comparison Across Interviews

BEING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Content	<p>1-long term stewardship 2- Ethical consistency. 3- authenticity. This is valued as being really important as a person. 3-This also goes for being ethical. 3-with all leadership courses it's important to first look at the self, and what you find important authentically. 3-Being authentic is vital as a leader 3-it is being stressed that authenticity is in the correct position for its value. 3-With regards to ethical consistency, it should stay present in the model. 4 -When looking at further aspects, the interviewee strongly agrees with the ethical consistency part. 5- Core values, what you stand for 5- All concepts there belong to sustainability</p>	<p>1-When you then feel strong enough in your sovereignty and your power, that's when you take action and do. 2- Authenticity to Personal authenticity. 2- Elaborate on equity and justice (not particular to HSL). 2- Add sustainable 2- Long-term stewardship to "Custodians of the future" or "custodians of the planet" 2- Add empathy, replacing emotional intelligence in doing 4 -stewardship is unclear. 4-When briefly explained the meaning, but not the interpretation, she mentions that in Swedish they would talk about the spine of a person, similar to the DNA of a person, what makes someone stand, be who they are.</p>	<p>1-The concepts ethical, justice and equity can be context dependant. -suggested to revise removing the ethical part 6- Unclear concepts for him: "Ethical consistency – it means what?" "Justice and equity – which justice? Which jurisdiction?" "Authenticity – means what?"</p>
BEING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Place	<p>1-long term stewardship should be in being. 3 most if not all great leadership models start with Being. 4- The doing part answers the question What do you do? Which is influenced by what you stand for, and that means you are taking action.</p>	<p>2- Emotional Intelligence to Empathy to Being</p>	
DOING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Content	<p>1-doing is the result of who you are, and once you start to listen and identify what you care about and talk to others,</p>	<p>1-have (create) the platform to exercise your abilities -Setting a good example through your behaviour</p>	<p>2- Participatory decision making is not an action; you may want to add facilitating or encouraging</p>

	<p>you then know about having a shared purpose and what that shared purpose is. With this in mind, it then becomes apparent that you are not the only one who feels a certain way</p> <p>2 - Embedding values, self-development</p> <p>4 -When she moves on to the circle of Doing, she agrees with what has been written. This is explained by when you know who you are and where you want to go, and what your beliefs are, it is easier to hold out a hand to cooperate with others.</p> <p>4- this goes hand in hand with sustainability is not a one-man-show or one-woman-show, but it's about cooperation</p> <p>4-This is a prime example of where cooperating and working together gives everyone a better situation.</p> <p>5- The actions there are very sustainability oriented</p>	<p>-someone takes action because they are passionate and have integrity. This will inspire those around you.</p> <p>1-Voice and act upon your beliefs</p> <p>1- feel safe in the environment to voice and act who you want to be and to live your values and your visions</p> <p>1- The way to overcome polarity is through communication best case, both parties reach a new layer of perspective</p> <p>1- it's more important to focus the impact you can make. In the end, we need to create a sustainable situation ourselves in our life</p> <p>1-In the long term, it's therefore about having a trusting environment for that where it can flourish.</p> <p>3-The main aspect about her daily work is making decision that make sure other people can work (facilitate)</p> <p>2- Facilitating stakeholder engagement and participatory decision-making, are very similar.</p> <p>3- establish a low entrance barrier. As a leader its important for people to be able to come to you for everything and for those who do not feel comfortable about doing that, it's harder for her as a leader to help them, and thus also harder for her implement this strategy.</p> <p>3-This is why it's important to create that safe environment</p> <p>3- as a team leader, important to be in the present. by being more present in her heart, she has more space in her head to be aware of the people around her and what is happening with them. which can be trained.</p> <p>3-If you are more present as a leader, you indirectly train yourself to know your people better too.</p> <p>3-As a present leader, you become more aware of when somebody is having a bad day, or something is wrong, because you have developed a better understanding or feeling of</p>	<p>3-participatory decision making. The reason for that is because, as a team leader, it's a challenging aspect to fulfil. trying this participatory decision making, but that it was hard getting everybody involved and on the same line and that when that happens, you can still give people the feeling that you're not listening to them.</p> <p>3- becomes harder to work towards goals. people tend to make decisions based on what they find important.</p> <p>3-This influences the decision making for long term goals.</p> <p>3-So, as a leader who wants to and strives to have everybody in her team on board in the decision-making process, it is a struggle.</p> <p>4- it is too general, relating to other areas outside sustainability</p> <p>6- Values in the strategy – which strategy?"</p>
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		<p>somebody's baseline on how they behave and are naturally.</p> <p>6- Too general for the stakeholders asking, "Which stakeholders do you want to achieve?" Using specific stakeholders like environmental stakeholders</p>	
DOING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Place	<p>5- The doing part answers the question What do you do? Which is influenced by what you stand for, and that means you are taking action</p>	<p>1-Switch places between believing and doing</p> <p>3- the positioning of self-development in the circle of Doing instead of in the circle of Being.</p> <p>3- other within the circle of Doing is externally oriented, whereas self-development is internally oriented</p> <p>3-It is understood why the concept of self-development is within the model, but just the positioning of this concept being in doing is being challenged</p> <p>3-When participative decision making, is something you do with people outside.</p> <p>3- Following others, is related to external environment,</p> <p>3- embedding values in your strategy and stakeholder engagement related to external environment.</p> <p>3- self-development is oriented inside, but is still an action. As this being results, she retracts the original feedback</p> <p>4 - Doing doesn't belong where it is currently situated in the framework.</p> <p>4-suggests switching places between believing and doing. 4-But as in sustainability, there can be multiple interpretations that think differently, that doesn't mean that they are either right or wrong though.</p>	
BELIEVING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:

<p>Content</p>	<p>1- strive for what we believe in, in the long run.</p> <p>1- self-awareness and your core being; being aware of yourself and your surroundings and identify what truly motivates you and what integrity means to you and what is important to you.</p> <p>1- self-awareness.</p> <p>3 -leadership is more on making sure that you can rally the groups together and get to a certain goal together. (shared purpose)</p> <p>2- Shared purpose, self-awareness, “your adaptive capacity”</p> <p>3-Furthermore, concepts of continuously learning is important. Together with the circle of Believing, she remarks this being intrinsic again</p> <p>4- systems thinking, Interconnectedness</p>	<p>1- have the ability to be a leader, you have the responsibility to be one.</p> <p>1-So, if you can afford to worry and talk about these subjects and you have the platform to exercise your abilities, then that lift one up to being a leader.</p> <p>2- Emotional Intelligence to Empathy to Being</p> <p>2- Transformational mindset to being</p> <p>2- Systems thinking is more an approach, a way of doing things</p> <p>3-To continue, it's important to know where it is you are going as a leader.</p> <p>3- people trust you to have a vision and they will get a bit anxious if you don't.</p> <p>3- have regular surveys or meetings to see if people are still pointing in the same direction, or if someone is losing track of the idea of the vision.</p> <p>3- Have a clear vision, and make sure that you rally all the groups.</p> <p>3- knowing your people.</p> <p>3- if you know your people well, you know how to make things work get people together.</p> <p>3-emotional intelligence, is something that can be trained.</p> <p>3- How do you train emotional intelligence? But is that the goal, to train emotional intelligence?</p> <p>3-Similar to other trainable facets, you can train to develop a transformational mindset, and you can train to be flexible and maintain harmony, and to think about the bigger picture.</p> <p>3-So the other things are rather trainable, but emotional intelligence is a bigger challenge to how far that can be stretched.</p> <p>3-even switching emotional intelligence with empathy, still</p>	<p>1-Switch places between believing and doing</p> <p>4- harmony, if everyone remains in harmony that is smooth and not a state of chaos, there won't be any innovation. So, she explains, seeking for problems to become a problem solver is important to consider due to this thought.</p> <p>4-share experiences and different perspectives.</p> <p>4- if you only stick to likeminded people, you're never going to create progress.</p> <p>4-So, as a sustainability leader, you must have the strength to be the fish who swims against the stream.</p> <p>4-It takes bravery to be a sustainable leader, to have the self-confidence of believing in what you care about whilst being humble and acknowledging when you were wrong and see from a new perspective.</p> <p>4-Being a sustainable leader, means you are the one speaking out, even when you get it wrong and get corrected, but that is part of being brave, and that is what makes a sustainable leader.</p> <p>6- “Self-awareness – about what?”</p> <p>“Transformational mindset – what is that?”</p>
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		<p>brings question to how trainable that attribute would be.</p> <p>3- this aspect comes across as something the framework wants people to be. Being attentive, however, could perhaps be trained.</p> <p>4- a term she believes is missing in the framework, is being humble.</p> <p>4-It is important to have a sense of acceptance that things change. Decisions made today could be the best today, but new actions might need to be taken based on new information that becomes available. That doesn't mean that the decision originally made was bad perse, but it's important to have that level of acceptance of that mindset.</p>	
BELIEVING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Place	<p>3-When participating in decision making, she explains, is something you do with the people outside. Following others, is also related to your external environment, as is embedding values in your strategy and stakeholder engagement.</p> <p>4- It is more related to the visioning, which can influence your believing.</p>	<p>1-Switch places between believing and doing</p> <p>2- Emotional Intelligence to Empathy to Being</p> <p>2- Transformational mindset to being</p> <p>4 - for the flow of the framework to make sense to her, she would switch places between Believing and Doing.</p> <p>4-Acknowledging that it can be interpreted differently too, she emphasises this as being her first remark.</p> <p>4-The flow of visualizing the framework in her first experience was have the values inside, from those values you believe, and from there you are what you believe and that is why you take action.</p> <p>4-In so Doing will be affected by the Being and what one is Believing.</p>	
VISIONING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Content	<p>2- Long-term sustainability vision.</p> <p>3- What you aim for, a sustainable definition.</p>	<p>1-Reaching a higher wisdom</p> <p>2- Defining what you mean by thriving, "that usually refers to finances, that is financially</p>	<p>1- removing the vision tag line "thriving world for people, ecosystems and future generations"</p>

		<p>successful, you want to add more to it, like, it's a healthy a healthy world.”</p> <p>5- allowing for creativity to work in different ways within it</p> <p>6- Vague core in the visioning “Thriving what in sustainability? And who is involve I see people and ecosystems, what above governments, and which ecosystems, where</p>	<p>so that people can fill in those gaps for themselves, depending on their passion.</p> <p>1-This vision could perhaps be replaced by “Purpose” as it can be related to the TBL. Purpose is perhaps not as grand as the original phrase, but purpose is something important to you that you identified</p>
VISIONING	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Place		<p>4 -Moving on to the aspect of Visioning, she explains that visioning is also part of her beliefs and her being, which in turn affects her doing towards what she would have as her mission.</p> <p>2- Using colours or slightly larger letters.</p>	
OVERALL	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Arrows	Bidirectional makes complete sense	<p>1-The current version, comes across as static and needs some additional explanation.</p> <p>1-This looks useful for people that are not as aware of this topic, because it feels static and more a solution for the present</p> <p>4 - visual interpretation of the layers being an exponential development of one another. One facet plus the next leads to something exponentially greater.</p>	<p>2- Something that was not clear was the use of the arrows, and how to begin reading the model.</p> <p>6- propose to change the design “You need to create an arrow... for example, start with being, touch doing, go to believing, then visioning.”</p>
OVERALL	Agree with:	May need to change:	Not fully agree with:
Representation	<p>1-but this subject fluid and there is a constant evolution and growth For a ‘normal’ person who hasn't given this topic much thought and to look at this to identify that there is a being, and believing and then a vision and the actions you make in relation to those that will also change followed by this being</p>	<p>1-this could apply to anything if ethical under Being is removed</p> <p>1- and the vision tag is replaced with whatever you want.</p> <p>1-But, our being and our believing results in us doing things.</p> <p>-Everything is linked and the texts that you have in each layered bubble, but the interpretation is up to different people in what order it goes.</p> <p>2- You can leave gaps ... make slices in it for people to fill in themselves.</p>	<p>5- The layer over layer was not that intuitive</p> <p>6- The diagram is confusing, “where I should start reading from visioning or being?”</p> <p>6- Create an acronym for the framework, since Holistic Sustainability Leadership seems too long</p>

	<p>dynamic, this could be really useful</p> <p>1-framework or model can be used in a way to awaken that level of awareness in people who have not thought about this as much</p> <p>2- The gerund form of the verb for the layer's titles: being, doing, believing, and visioning.</p> <p>6- potential to be applied in different fields</p>	<p>Include potential critiques</p> <p>2- Acknowledge the challenged of the applications</p> <p>4-Inner Development Goals. These IDGs are a parallel system to the SDGs and relate to the transformation of each person to into a sustainable way of living.</p> <p>4-different areas relating to caring for others, for the world and collaborating as social skills and enabling change.</p> <p>4-look into these IDGs</p> <p>4-coming to a level of communication.</p> <p>4-For some who are in sustainability business, they can be soft. these things are hard to put into figures and numbers. 4-interesting for board members and other leaders of the company.</p> <p>4-The goal, is to work as smart as possible with the resources we have access to. This includes financial resources, but also people, and earth, the environment.</p> <p>4-Because this is easier to communicate to people who are less value driven as it is normally due to saving time and money when work is carried out smarter.</p> <p>4-The act of working smarter can be measured in financial terms or can be transformed into money, but it comes down to how you can work or do or act as smart as possible.</p> <p>5- To begin reading, he tried following the arrows in order of layers, first being, the doing, then believing, then being again.</p> <p>5- make it adaptable for other contexts, showing an example of the framework getting applied</p> <p>5- Backcasting from the visioning.</p> <p>5- Have the title visible</p> <p>6- Add more sustainability related terms</p> <p>6- Make it clearer what is the goal of the framework and what is the vision of it</p>	<p>6- In terms of practicality, he feels the framework is too dense to be applicable in a specific timeframe: How many days is this consultancy? 10 days? One month?"</p> <p>6- Prepare for critiques from different actors</p>
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Appendix 6. Trello workspace for research project

The screenshot shows a Trello workspace with five columns: BRAINSTORM, TODO, Supervisions, Questions!, and Resources. Each column contains cards with tasks and progress indicators.

- BRAINSTORM**:
 - Link to brainstorming sections (4 comments)
 - First Draft
 - Thesis V1
- TODO**:
 - Move anything 'ready' here (1 comment)
 - HH-Master-S1:Luisa Naranjo, Daniel Kenyon-Jackson (14 feb, 1 comment)
 - HH-Master-DiscussionMaterial-
- Supervisions**:
 - Shcedule for supervisions (1 comment)
 - Introduction (30 ene)
 - Weeks 7,8,9
- Questions!**:
 - Questions need to be discussed (1 comment)
 - Questions to supervision (1 comment)
 - Question for us to solve
- Resources**:
 - Share any resources we find
 - Literature Review (9 comments, 0/3 emails)
 - Methodology

At the bottom of the workspace, there are icons for email, calendar, list view, and board view.

Appendix 7. Literature Review Database sample

	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1	Reference of article	Main Topic	Year	Purpose	Literature review and/or theoretical framework	Method	Context	Results	Contributions
2	Sajjad, A., Eweje, G., & Raziq, M. M. (2024). Sustainability leadership: An integrative review and conceptual synthesis. <i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i> , 33(4), 2849–2867. https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.3631	Sustainability Leadership	2024	the purpose of this review paper is to provide conceptual synthesis and critical appraisal of the extant literature on sustainability leadership	Drawing on a systems theory perspective on paradox, we developed an integrative multilevel sustainability leadership framework, which demonstrates the linkages between individual-level mechanisms (micro), organizational-level mechanisms (meso), and societal context (macro). The framework explicates the key underlying mechanisms of sustainability leadership functioning embedded in paradoxical tensions to address complex and multifaceted sustainability issues.	leadership mechanisms (Whittemore & Knaf, 2005). An integrative review allows an in-depth critical exploration of the subject matter and synthesis of diverse interrelated concepts through reviewing, comparing, synthesizing, and evaluating new relationships in distinct streams of literature (Torraco, 2005) and developing the novel perspectives and frameworks (Snyder, 2019) imperative for advancing theoretical augmentation and improving managerial practice.	environment and continually aligns and adapts micro- and meso-level processes to address divergent and interconnected concerns for economic prosperity, social welfare, and environmental protection within and across multilevel systems. The framework proposed in this article contributes to leadership research by identifying several pathways and research opportunities to extend sustainability leadership theory and wider streams of cross-disciplinary research that integrate sustainability and leadership concepts.	understanding of how these aspects are connected and affect each other. Drawing on a systems theory perspective on paradox, we developed an integrative multilevel sustainability leadership framework, which demonstrates the linkages between individual-level mechanisms (micro), organizational-level mechanisms (meso), and societal context (macro). The framework explicates the key underlying mechanisms of sustainability leadership functioning embedded in paradoxical tensions to address complex and multifaceted sustainability issues.	function within complex, paradoxical system. The integrative multilevel sustainability leadership framework introduced in this paper demonstrates conditions shape, influence, and/or interact with processes (e.g., perceptions, reflexivity, value) in turn influences organizational (meso) processes, behaviors, and functioning. We contribute by offering some plausible research directions that could help advance interdisciplinary the crossroads of the sustainability and leadership. The paper provides a holistic view of sustainability essential individual and organizational mechanism function within complex, paradoxical system. Gap: Lacking empirical evidence to test the
3	Hallinger, P., & Suriyankietkaew, S. (2018). Science Mapping of the Knowledge Base on Sustainable Leadership, 1990–2018. <i>Sustainability</i> , 10(12), 4846. https://doi.org/10.3390/su10124846	Sustainability Leadership	2018	The goals of the review were to document the size, growth trajectory, and geographic distribution of this literature, identify key journals, authors, and documents, analyze the intellectual structure of this knowledge base, and highlight emerging topics.	The first framework establishes sustainable leadership in the organizational and social systems within which it is enacted. The second framework provides a basis for this inquiry into the literature or 'knowledge base' on sustainable leadership. The framework proposes a means of conceptualizing a knowledge base in terms of a set of analytical components [34,37,38,39,40].	This review of research employed science mapping tools to examine 952 Scopus-indexed documents explicitly concerned with sustainable leadership.	concentrated in Western developed societies but global in scope.	knowledge base of recent vintage, concentrated in Western developed societies but global in scope. Six Schools of Thought were identified within this knowledge base, one of which—Sustainable Leadership—was singled out for attention. As the first bibliometric review of research on sustainable leadership, this review provides a reference for scholars entering this domain, as well as guidance with respect to high value frameworks, foci for future research, and practical implications.	As the first bibliometric review of research on sustainable leadership, this review provides a reference for scholars entering this domain, as well as guidance with respect to high value frameworks, foci for future research, and practical implications.
4	Armani, A. B., Petriani, M., & Santos, A. C. (2020). What are the Attributes of Sustainable Leadership?. <i>Review of Business Management</i> , 22(4), 600–617.	Sustainability Leadership	2020	Purpose – The purpose of the study is to provide a more holistic perspective on sustainable leadership (SL), understanding which of its attributes enable		Design/methodology/approach – We carried out an exploratory and qualitative study through multiple and comparative case studies. We selected four organizations and conducted interviews with three different groups of managers in each organization: CSR manager, HR manager, and business managers. In addition, we collected institutional and external documents. We also	Taking this into account, the choice of the cases sought to meet two criteria: (1) being listed (or not) in the Bovespa Corporate Sustainability Index (ISE) in 2016 and (2) different lengths of time in the index. In the Brazilian	Findings – The role of SL changes according to organizational maturity in relation to sustainability. Even the seven attributes recognized as important by all managers (leadership, interpersonal skills, focus on sustainability, orientation toward change, alignment with the organizational culture, values and moral principles, and	The proposed framework not only identified also connected them under two perspectives, are interdependent and interrelated. Our contribution of the framework as a guide to lead change in organizations, whether through developing

Appendix 8. Chat-GPT Prompt

Chat-GPT Prompt:

I want to begin a new chat on the work I am doing with my thesis, please forget anything that we have worked on related to the topic before. I want you to primarily act as a very Supportive supervisor, suggesting ideas, good research practices, honest feedback and from time to time refining the text.