“Sustainable leadership pre- and within the 21st century”

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Sustainable leadership pre- and within the 21st century

Abstract

This paper reviews literature on sustainable leadership pre- and within the 21st century, using the following nuances: (1) selected dynamics attributable to socio-demographics, (2) implications and barriers that skew gender and leadership bias, and (3) the role of cultural norms and values in leadership practices and processes within organizations.

The global challenge for research on sustainable leadership is also discussed, as it must take into account the different cultures, needs and requirements of different organizations within specific environmental contexts. A challenge spoke to the use of international models and strategies in order to achieve semantic interoperability. It is concluded that from the established theoretical framework, a focus on culture and sustainable leadership is needed, as these impact on various aspects of leadership including sustainability. It is suggested that for the future, emerging issues should incorporate sustainability into businesses in order to align environmental and social objectives with business strategies.

Keywords: culture, intersection, sustainability, leadership, sustainable leadership.
JEL Classification: G56, M10.

Introduction

Discussions around sustainability have emerged to be central and pivotal in for strategic thinking and decision-making in the sense that they provide policy makers with anchors for responses, especially in the competitive corporate world. To this end, leading sustainability scholars suggest that organizations that do not or which respond weakly to sustainability will almost certainly face extinction (Galbreath, 2011; Bansal, 2001; Bansal, 2005). On the other hand, other schools of thought are of the view that there is a great need to integrate issues of sustainability into businesses' mission statements, since their relationships with stakeholders are among the defining criteria for success in the 21st century (Stranislaw, 2007; Vergragt and Quist, 2011). Thus, leadership thought anchors around sustainability recognize that the experience of change itself, and the dissonance it creates, provides a new thinking, discoveries, and innovations, which can revitalize organizations, communities, and the globe. Therefore, to be competitive in the 21st century, the leader needs to find the balance among and between competing priorities and demands. These demands could be economic, social, and environmentally sustainable solutions, which are compelling leadership opportunities that could ultimately be grounded in personal ethics that reach beyond self-interest.

This literature review paper, therefore, suggests that further study of internal drivers is needed, because studying such drivers could reveal how organizations develop an understanding of sustainability, which will nudge them to start acting on this understanding. Of particular interest is the link between gender and sustainability. Because men and women as management structures, they are ultimate decision-making groupings within organizations, and they wield substantial power and responsibility in overseeing organizations. This power has significant influence on strategies that, in turn, affect subsequent performance. Therefore, determining the right composition of the executive management team is of critical importance. Consequently, modern management that sees gender diversity as of strategic importance is most likely to succeed.

Lastly, existing literature on sustainability asserts that sustainable development requires the simultaneous adoption of environmental, economic, and equity principles (Bansal, 2001; Bansal, 2005). This thought process, however, challenges the deep-rooted anchors of the three pillars of sustainability and indicates disparities with economic prosperity. Although leaders in organizations argue that the three pillars of sustainable development are mutually inclusive, over time, commitments by businesses have seen a shift and change away from sustainable development, especially where profits are threatened. Thus, discussions focusing primarily on gender and leadership, should also target business's internal organizational processes that encompass efficiency and effectiveness (Peteraf, 1993). On the other hand, some gender perspectives

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argue that change is often motivated by organizations that seek social approval (Lenski, 2013). Hence, the authors drew on these perspectives, as they sort to understand the reasons behind why organizations commit to sustainable development and the notion that commitments could change over time.

1. Theoretical framework

The literature on gender roles paints a complex picture of the various ways that women are constrained into traditionally feminine roles. However, it is less known of how these roles affect individual identity. The few studies that address identity issues among women describe significant cultural conflicts that arise as individuals attempt to negotiate their own identities in ethnically homogenous and male-dominated academic cultures (see Johnsrud and Sadao, 1998; Turner, 2002; Turner et al., 1999).

In order to expand the understanding of women and identity, there is, therefore, a need to focus on gendered performances (or "doing gender") and on how social practices define gendered behavior in the context of specific settings like a university community.

1.1. Culture and gender. South Africa has long been perceived as a country that is marked by masculinity. It is also noted to be an heir to a form of social organization that is dominated by patriarchal behavior (Booysen and Nkomo, 2010). Masculinity and patriarchal structures are generally associated with conservative values, wherein men oppose women's rights and their pursuit of issues, which fall outside of traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, over the past years, women have made great strides especially in the workplace, although inequality persists.

Even then, despite numerous attempts to achieve a more sustainable society and work groups, there is not much progress in relation to gender and sustainability. For example, feminist writers from the early 1970's emphasized the differences between men and women, distinctions, which were considered to be constructed because of the result of sex role socialization. This left women ill-equipped to compete in the labor market (Booysen and Nkomo, 2010), hence, the argument that there are forces, which counteract sustainable development especially as it pertains to gender (Casimir and Dutilh, 2003).

2. Socio-demographic gender role orientations and their intersections

2.1. Societal perceptions and stereotypes. South Africa has experienced a process of economic and social change that has enabled reduction of the race and gender gaps in some areas,but unfortunately widened these in others. The purpose here is to illustrate the link between gender ideology, roles and societal change in terms of how women are viewed in society among a male population. Furthermore, this will bring out an understanding regarding why, despite the fact that laws have changed and access to equal opportunities is available, significantly positive outcomes are not tangible.

Literature indicates that in the United States of America and the United Kingdom, executive women felt that the greatest entrenched barrier to entry into leadership positions was society at large, mainly as a result of the perception that women are not cut out for executive management (see Adkins, 2006). In the South African context, opposing literature reveals that women have opportunities, and therefore, potentially more economic power available to them than their male counterparts (see Booysen and Nkomo, 2010). However, there is also a perception that women have been appointed to executive positions as part of affirmative action initiatives rather than because they have requisite skills or qualification (see Cummings, 2004). On the other hand, socialization has focused men and women into a false sense that they are acting naturally, without realizing that they are following a socially constructed role.

Be that may, attitudes and expectations surrounding gender roles are typically based not on inherent or natural gender differences, but on stereotypes about attitudes, traits, and behavior patterns of women and men. Gender stereotypes, thus, form the basis of sexism, i.e., the prejudice beliefs that value males over females (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Booysen and Nkomo, 2010; Acker, 2009; Ibarra et al., 2013).

3. Sustainable development

3.1. The three principles of sustainable development. In its early years, the meaning of the term 'sustainable development' was perceived to be ambiguous and this led to a proliferation of definitions. Only recently has one definition emerged as dominant over others. Discussions have also coalesced around the three principles that ground sustainable development, which are environmental integrity, economic prosperity, and social equity (Bansal, 2005; Brundtland, 1987). Because each of these principles individually represents a necessary, but insufficient condition, it means that if any one of them is not supported, then economic development will not be sustainable. These principles are expanded on in the following sections.

3.1.1. Environmental integrity. The principles of environmental integrity endeavor to ensure that activities by humans preserve water resources, air and the land to the greatest extent possible. Further, growth of the global population, additional to consumption that is deemed to be too excessive, as well as a notice able depletion of natural resources, all threaten the integrity of the environment. Significant negative impacts may be because of human activities on the natural environment. Some of the impacts would include a decrease in biodiversity, depletion of the ozone layer with consequential accumulation of the gasses that cause the greenhouse effect, additional to challenges like the management of waste, deforestation, and spillages of toxic material (O'Rourke and Connolly, 2003; Bansal, 2005; Dzwairo, 2011; Dzwairo et al., 2006; Dzwairo et al., 2010). This means that a compromised natural environment would result in compromised human necessities, for example, water, air and food.

3.1.2. Social equity. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012) argued that the social equity principle ensures that all members of society have equitable access to resources and opportunities. Sustainable development perspective enforces the perceptions and the recognition that present and future "needs" must be met (Redclift, 2005; Bansal, 2005). Basic needs, for example, clothing, food and shelter, are really not all that is required by humans. Necessities include a good quality of life, which culminates from education, a health care system that responds to socio-economic and environmental challenges, as well as an enabling political environment (Śleszyński, 2016). The existing literature states that sustainability is a universal goal and that even the "narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation". This implies that future generations, indigenous peoples, and the disenfranchized (vulnerable groups) are entitled to the same level of resources as more privileged people (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002).

3.1.3. Economic prosperity. Finally, the principle of economic prosperity encourages a reasonable quality of life by supporting and enhancing the productivity of individuals, as well as organizations, within the societies that we live in individually (Holliday et al., 2002). The envisaged prosperity of economies involves creating and distributing services and goods in such a manner that it helps to elevate the global standard of living. Be that may, international markets that are open and competitive encourage efficiency, creation of wealth and innovation, all of which are fundamental structures of sustainable development (Welford, 2013). Economic prosperity is, thus, intrinsically tied to the other two sustainability principles, which are environmental integrity and social equity (Magis and Shinn, 2009), while, for example, partners to the economic exchanges must be satisfied if the basis of exchange is to be equitable (Dzwairo et al., 2010). Even then, people looking to meet basic needs such as clothing, food, and shelter will naturally be inclined to use natural resources for those needs, which are immediate needs at the cost of long-term environmental health. This is an example of inequitable economic exchange between humans and the environment.

A society that does not create economic prosperity will ultimately compromize its own health and well-being (Jackson, 2011). Consequently, inequitable access to benefits that are tied to income might provide fertile ground for conflict among peoples with competing needs, as they strive to achieve some perceived sense of equity (Okoye, 2010). On the other hand, sustainability issues like prevention or reduction of pollution, eliminate or reduce waste by encouraging activities that are deemed robust and proven to be technologically or process-related innovations (Glavič and Lukman, 2007). However, as expected in the Environmental Kuznets Curve, which is a tool that is used in environmental economics (Dzwairo, 2011), it is when an environment attains sufficiently high standards of living, that greater attention is given to environmental amenities. Arrow et al. (1995, p. 92) noted that this might lead to new institutions targeting environmental protection, among other strategies. Thus, through continuous improvement, leaders identify inefficiencies and improve processes that are related to these inefficiencies. In this way, prevention of pollution becomes a stimulus for an organization to develop capabilities and resources, which are more superior than processes that target control of the pollution (Alfred and Adam, 2009). Practices that are deemed to be sound from a corporate environmental management point of view are thus likely to align with strong corporate environmental performance. However, this view does not support the mind-set that economic growth is sufficient to induce environmental improvement in general, nor that the environmental effects of growth may be overlooked (Dzwairo, 2011).

4. Corporate sustainable development

Organizations must endeavor to practice principles that align with sustainable development principles for their policies, practices and products so that

overall, equity may be expressed. Furthermore, looking at the three principles that underpin sustainable development, these should consequently be drawn-out to the level of the organization. Since the concept of societal notion of sustainable development already assumes that corporate sustainable development occurs when the three principles of sustainability intersect, it means, then, that these conditions are a necessity for achieving corporate sustainable development.

4.1. Environmental integrity through corporate environmental management. Corporate environmental management is an effort by organizations to reduce the size of their 'ecological footprint'. Every organization has an environmental impact, whether it is merely by lighting office buildings or, more significantly, through the waste and emissions generated by production processes (Bansal and Roth, 2000). Therefore, organizations that support the protection of environmental resources and associated outputs are the ones which need to be designed or re-designed so that they provide the right incentives for protecting the resilience of those environments (Dzwairo, 2011).

4.2. Social equity that is achieved from embracing corporate social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility necessitates that businesses embrace the legal, ethical, economic, and unrestricted prospects of all stakeholders, including those that are financially inclined (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). Corporate social responsibility takes into account three processes, which are stakeholder management, management of social issues, as well as environmental assessment (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). Environmental assessment or scanning enables organizations to identify social, economic, and environmental issues and respond to them accordingly (Galbreath, 2016; Galbreath, 2010; Galbreath, 2011). Therefore, by considering stakeholder management, organizations react to the external environment, which includes outside organizations and the natural environment, as well as to individuals (Galbreath, 2016). Therefore, corporate social responsibility means upholding a high standard, which is often related to high corporate social performance (Jackson and Apostolakou, 2010).

Further, sustainability is not considered as an aspect of transformational leadership in Bass's Model. However, some articles on sustainability (Brundtland et al., 1987; Lucas et al., 2007) recognized the integration of *environment, economy* and *society* in place, and the importance of coordination and cooperation to the effective realization of organizational vision. This is supported by the environmental integrity principle, which ensures that human activities do not erode the earth's land, air, and water resources. Dzwairo et al. (2010) provided another definition of sustainability, where the article stated that sustainable development is one which dictates that a sound growth pattern of a community should be a logistic S-curve of growth of a viable system. On the other hand, the social equity principle ensures that all members of society have equal access to resources and opportunities.

The economic prosperity principle promotes a reasonable quality of life through the productive capacity of organizations and individuals in society (Holliday et al., 2002). This principle is intrinsically tied to the principles of social equity and environmental integrity (Schmidheiny, 1992; Brundtland et al., 1987). The concept of sustainability, then, gives the expression to feelings of concern and pictures an indistinct vision of a new and better world. To achieve this world, it is imperative that drastic societal change is needed.

4.3. Sustainability in organizations. Studies on the inclusion of economic aspects of corporate sustainability suggest that environmental and social aspects of sustainability, as evaluation criteria for corporate sustainability, are prevalent. This then stands in contrast to the definition of sustainable development, which states that it is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland et al., 1987). This definition reverberates with corporate sustainability, as it aims to assimilate environmental and socio-economic issues within the seven principles of sustainability (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004; Hargreaves and Fink, 2012).

Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) advocated for going beyond the "triple bottom", because sustainable leadership is about why some organizations stay at the forefront of their industry, no matter the environmental influences around them. This research revealed evidence to support, among other critical issues, especially the "honeybee" principles and why and how these paid off for a business. Given the fact that nature is bound by limits and the obligation to consider the needs of both society and shareholders, without compromizing economic dimension, organizations are, thus, driven towards developing more sustainable ways of business management (Morioka and Carvalho, 2016).

Research on sustainability within an organization, on the one hand, and the 'triple-bottom-line' approach, on the other, emphasize the simultaneous

relevance of economic, environmental and social corporate performance as common (Smith et al., 2011). This is because economic stability of an organization is viewed as an indication for the business's ability to contribute to the goal of long-term sustainability, which should ultimately translate to corporate sustainability.

Because of the rising influence of socially responsible investments by sustainability-oriented practicing organizations, corporate investment policy is becoming an important lever for the further dissemination of sustainable corporate practices. However, it is noted that such integration, because it is an indicator for management's strong inclination towards corporate sustainability, potentially raises organizations' awareness for this issue. It also potentially makes corporate sustainability to be an integral part of corporate culture (Van Velsor et al., 2009; Strand, 2013).

It is argued, then, that organizational performance may affect management actions and decision making and, as a result, any organization that aims to be sustainable must develop a strategy that incorporates sustainability (Vergragt and Quist, 2011). Sustainability can be achieved by creating a series of aligned consequences resulting in effectiveness. A sustainable system may be useful to provide information for decision making for the promotion of organizational learning and to encourage stakeholder engagement (Morioka and Carvalho, 2016). It is, therefore, suggested that there be incorporation of sustainability into business (Crittenden et al., 2011), which aligns environmental and social objectives with business strategies (Searcy, 2012).

Morerover, Sharma and Henriques (2005) argued that stakeholders such as major customers, environmental groups, and employees have a positive influence on levels of sustainability. It is, thus, nuanced that most of the studies on sustainability focus mainly on the external drivers, and not specifically on the internal drivers, including demographics.

5. Leadership

5.1. Leadership in the 21st century. The leadership concept is central to this paper. What constitute the meaning of each concept, both theoretically and practically, are entangled in definitional welter. It is not within the scope of this piece to contribute to the welter of existing definitions, but to extract perspectives that will be analytically useful for the paper. In the context of the various theories and persuasions on what constitutes good leadership, ranging from traits theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory, to new theories of leadership, leadership comes across as a form of power, a subtle form of control, but that which is more effective than the naked use of authority (Hay and Hodgkinson, 2006). Within an intellectual discourse of this nature, the problem is usually concerned with the definition of terms. It is very difficult to attempt a definition of leadership, or in other words, it is difficult to define what makes certain persons to be "leaders". Thus, in most cases, researchers tend to define leadership in terms of personality and physical traits, while others believe that leadership is represented by a set of prescribed behaviors.

Rost (1993) contended that a majority of leadership studies are about management rather than leadership. The paper challenged the industrial paradigm of leadership as management and called for a new school of leadership. It went further to define leadership as "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend for real changes that reflect their mutual purposes". Additionally, it was noted that the dynamic interactions between leaders and followers had been greatly overlooked, therefore, it was imperative that scholars should pay more attention to this aspect of the subject (Rost, 1993).

To this end and within the framework of 'new theories of leadership', two influential theories called charismatic leadership theory (House, 1977; Klein and House, 1995) and transformation leadership theory (Bass, 1985) focus on the context of governance and emphasize the leader's ability to cope with radical change, which aims to manage crises.

The current discussion looked at leadership with a focus on some of the leadership styles that could have/or could not have enhanced sustainability before and within the 21st century, with a view to highlight some of the pros and cons of each era's issues. Marchiondo et al. (2015) used an empirical approach to test the Leadership Identity Construction Theory. One of its conclusions indicated that the negotiated relational leader identity process ultimately provided influence towards decision-making, which is a necessary trait in any public office.

Other research has proposed that in order to attain a greater degree of sustainability in modern society, individual actions are needed. However, the intention of leaders is crucial in this discussion, as is their link to community (i.e., sustainability for whom?) and the environment (Ellyard, 2001, pp. 32-33).

It is critical to note that theories of leadership have tended to neglect diversity issues. Although theories on leadership have evolved in the sense that they are more and more becoming mirrors to assist with

reflecting the changing social contexts, they still do not assist with adequate voicing of issues around social justice, diversity and equity. In order to remain relevant in the 21st century, leadership theories, thus, require an expansion of context, which should ideally incorporate diversity, amidst new social challenges, emerging global concerns, and changing population demographics (Chin, 2010).

5.1.1. Contemporary, implicit and courageous leadership styles. Looking at pre- 21st century, and using what is called "contemporary leadership", it was noted that the way in which leaders made decisions, then, tended to perpetuate hunger, poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, terrorism and wars, lack of liberty and justice, and overall, an unjust global system. The same leadership style is also blamed for the current (Chin et al.'s 2012) notice able environmental destruction, which threatens present and future generations (see Şen and Eren, 2012).

5.1.2. Five webs of belief. On the other hand, "implicit leadership" and followership theories provide implicit assumptions of (good) leaders and followers, respectively (Junker and van Dick, 2014). Discussions in the 21st century now tend to encourage what are termed "courageous leadership" practices. These practices have characteristics of bravery, as well as exceptional and emotional capacity to make drastic changes. They are also described as having "spirit", which is a trait that introduces the humanity side of leadership (Şen et al., 2013). O'Connell (2014) rather proposed a framework for a 21st century leader development. This framework incorporates "five webs of belief", which are learning, reverence, service, authenticity and flaneur (O'Connell, 2014).

5.1.3. Some dimensions of leadership. Soskice (2014) and Strauss (2015) argued the lack of any systematic account of the exercise of power in modern 21st century states like Sweden, while Hargreaves and Fink (2004) specified the Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership and provided examples using an education system. The seven principles of sustainable leadership are: Depth (matters), Length (lasts), Breadth (spreads), Justice (does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment), Diversity (promotes cohesive diversity), Resource fulness (develops and does not deplete material and human resources), and Conservation (learns from the best of the past to create an even better future) (Hargreaves and Fink, 2012).

Conclusion

Presently, many organizations operate within turbulent environments. In order for them to cope, their leaders should strive to create unique and flexible work plans, which are sustainable. The sustainable developmental plans should not only focus on economic prosperity, but should also include social and environmental prosperity. Leaders need to understand that for competitive advantage, it is important to transform sustainable developmentplans to ensure that human activities do not erode the natural resources, while, at the same time, maintaining social equity more specific in terms of gender. Thus, environmental integrity becomes a vital pillar of successful organizations.

It can then be concluded that although there has been progress towards addressing issues of social equity, especially gender equality in some areas, much still needs to be done by way of exploring the potential of women to engage in, contribute to and benefit from sustainable development. This, they could do in their capacities as leaders, participants and agents of change. The implementation process should be supported by removal of barriers to women's full and equal participation in decision-making and management at all levels.

Therefore, integrating economic, socio and ecological discussions with the concept and practice of development, will provide and strengthen the view to advancing inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development. This approach is of critical importance for women especially those in leadership positions. Further, promoting environmental integrity dialogues will create an environment that is conducive to sustainable development. This has been affirmed from discussions that highlight women as having abilities to harness, grow, develop and promote dialogue within the occupancy of gender and sustainable leadership.

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