

Sustainability Leadership and Boards: A Conceptual Framework

Sanja Zivkovic

University of Zagreb, Croatia

sanja.zivkovic6@gmail.com

Abstract: Sustainability demands boards to be intrinsically motivated. Translating the sustainability agenda into measurable social and environmental outcomes implies a behavioral transformation on the individual, group, and organizational levels. Focusing only on regulatory requirements, ESG metrics, and corporate reputation does not lead to the genuine commitment of board members to enhance the organization's sustainability. Embedding sustainability into the organization's business model and strategy calls for the board's commitment and impactful actions. Therefore, this study attempts to provide new insights on how boards could enhance their sustainability engagement and performance by developing and demonstrating specific leadership behaviors. For this purpose, a literature review has been conducted. To draw on the premises of stakeholder theory and selected leadership constructs, the method of theory synthesis was used. This study builds on and extends the existing leadership and corporate governance literature by providing a conceptual framework that links sustainability leadership and board dimensions: purpose and authenticity, power and responsibility, and process and transformation. It proposes the initial assessment questions for each dimension. The proposed conceptual and assessment frameworks offer practical implications for various stakeholders. Board members can use them as self-assessment and development tools that can enhance their sustainability engagement and leadership behaviors. Based on these frameworks, human resources management could define sustainability competencies to be considered in board recruitment, assessment, development, and succession. Leadership and organizational development specialists could also use these guidelines to design and implement sustainability leadership development programs. By offering a novel perspective that links sustainability efforts and leadership behaviors of boards, these research contributions could inspire organizations to move beyond compliance-oriented sustainability toward genuine sustainability. Future research could be directed at validating the proposed conceptual framework by conducting qualitative and quantitative studies to explore the board members' perceptions and views on specific leadership behaviors in the context of the sustainability agenda.

Keywords: sustainability, leadership, sustainability leadership, boards, conceptual framework

1. Introduction

Sustainability requirements are increasingly impacting the corporate world. The shift in the consciousness of consumers, investors, employees, governments, and communities about social and environmental issues resulted in redesigning the missions, strategies, and practices of many organizations (Chams and Garcia-Blandon, 2019; Galpin and Whittington, 2012). Requirements of various stakeholders are putting pressure on boards to act on the sustainability agenda more effectively (Breedon and Skinner, 2021). To maintain legitimacy and create a competitive advantage, organizational leadership needs to ensure effective resource allocation and promotion of social welfare (Chams and AlSagheer, 2017; Galbreath, 2018; Poddar, Narula and Zutshi, 2019). Organizations are increasingly becoming aware of the growing link between sustainable practices and corporate effectiveness (Fernando, Jabbour and Wah, 2019). Therefore, the concept of sustainability has broadened its boundaries from being mostly related to environmental issues to now being embedded into the organization's overall business model (Naciti, Cesaroni and Pulejo, 2021).

Several terminologies are applied in the literature to reflect sustainable practices, such as environmental, social, and governance (ESG), corporate social responsibility (CSR), triple bottom line (TBL), and corporate or business sustainability (Armstrong, 2020; Chams and Garcia-Blandon, 2019; Lokuwaduge and Heenetigala, 2017). The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at prosperity for people and the planet. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the UN Global Compact (UNGC), and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) developed the SDG Compass to guide businesses in measuring and managing their contribution to the realization of the SDGs. As sustainability is a broad term, understanding of what it entails can differ widely between directors on the same board as well as between different organizations (Smith and Soonieus, 2021). However, it should be emphasized that sustainability is not an organizational objective but rather a framework that guides the fulfillment of purpose and the creation of long-term value for all stakeholders. Translating the sustainability agenda into measurable social and environmental outcomes implies a behavioral transformation on the individual, group, and organizational levels.

Balancing simultaneous and sometimes contradictory social, environmental, and economic requirements presents a leadership opportunity (Ferdig, 2007). The need to differentiate sustainability leadership from

leadership, in general, may be necessary but a temporary phenomenon (Visser and Courtice, 2011). Sustainability leaders take conscious actions, individually and collectively, leading to outcomes that support and sustain healthy economic, environmental, and social systems (Ferdig, 2007). These leaders can engage in dialogue and partnerships with different members of society, deal with complex problems, respond flexibly to change, and have the emotional intelligence to adaptively engage with their own emotions associated with complexity (Bendell and Little, 2015; Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Szekely and Knirsch, 2005). Fry and Egel (2021) emphasize the importance of cultivating a global mindset for sustainability, which incorporates an ethic of remote moral responsibility and an ethic of care and compassion. Leaders' ability to instill sustainability into people, places, products, processes, and profits enables them to use their power of influence for a positive social and environmental impact (Weybrecht, 2014, as cited in Amankwa, 2018). To be at the heart of the organization's strategy, sustainability needs to be an integral part of the board's agenda (Smith and Soonieus, 2021).

Embedding sustainability into the organization's business model and strategy calls for the board's commitment and impactful actions. Nowadays, one of the key board's roles is to increase awareness of sustainability implementation, by adopting a systematic balancing between shareholders' and stakeholders' interests (Chams and Garcia-Blandon, 2019). Thus, social and environmental concerns imposed more complex and broader responsibilities on boards. To address the interests and needs of various stakeholders, greater emphasis is put on sustainability behaviors, disclosure, and performance. As the board of directors is the most important governance mechanism within the organization, its composition, especially in terms of gender, age, and specific competencies, is considered a crucial determinant of the performance of the organization (Rao and Tilt, 2016) in general, and of sustainability performance, in particular (Lawrence, Collins and Roper, 2013; Naciti, Cesaroni and Pulejo, 2021). While many organizations have progressed in designing and implementing their sustainability strategies, many boards and executive teams are still lagging in improving their environmental, social, and governance performance (Breedon and Skinner, 2021). The reasons for insufficient engagement of boards are related to the lack of necessary information, expertise, and processes, and especially to beliefs and attitudes that are not aligned with the values of sustainability (Smith and Soonieus, 2021).

Sustainability demands boards to be intrinsically motivated. Focus only on regulatory requirements, ESG metrics and corporate reputation does not lead to genuine commitment of board members to enhance the organization's sustainability engagement and performance. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following research question: How boards can view the sustainability agenda as an opportunity to develop and demonstrate specific leadership behaviors? For this purpose, a literature review has been conducted. To draw on multiple concepts and theories that play differing roles, in this conceptual paper the method of theory synthesis was used (Jaakkola, 2020). Papers of this type contribute by integrating extant knowledge and enabling scholars to see a concept in a new way by transforming previous findings and theory into a novel perspective that links phenomena previously considered distinct (MacInnis, 2011).

In this study, the selected board dimensions related to sustainability are examined in line with the premises of stakeholder theory. Freeman (1984) states that the foundation of this theory is the organization's acknowledgment of its responsibilities not only toward shareholders but also toward wider groups of stakeholders. Based on this theoretical framework, boards and management must ensure that the organization can create value for all stakeholders (De Graaf and Stoelhorst, 2013; Tipurić et al, 2008). While stakeholder theory is helpful in addressing issues related to the functioning of corporate governance mechanisms and their effects on sustainability as a whole (Naciti, Cesaroni and Pulejo, 2021), sustainability efforts have not been as effective as they could be, partially as boards and management often do not connect sustainability with leadership behaviors. The emphasis on values that underlies most conceptions of sustainability also requires a consideration of leadership constructs, such as authenticity, responsibility, and transformation (Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew, 2018). Therefore, this study links stakeholder theory with selected constructs that set a frame for sustainability leadership. This paper proposes a conceptual framework that links sustainability leadership and board dimensions (Figure 1), with the purpose to inspire boards to enhance their sustainability engagement and performance by developing and demonstrating specific leadership behaviors.

This paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, the next three sections describe leadership and board dimensions selected as the most relevant from the sustainability perspective. Section 2 links purpose and authenticity, Section 3 power and responsibility, while Section 4 is related to process and transformation. Finally, the conclusion highlights the paper's main contributions and provides future research recommendations.



Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking sustainability leadership and board dimensions

Source: Author's work

2. Purpose and authenticity

Purpose connects to authenticity. The alignment of individual and organizational purposes can be considered as a reflection of board members' authenticity. A search for purpose is something that appears as an intrinsic element of the human condition (Frankl, 1959). A challenge for boards is to ensure the purpose of an organization is one most stakeholders can relate to and that engages them (Coulson-Thomas, 2016). The purpose is often based on values. Values provide a source of inspiration and commitment among organizational stakeholders (Morsing and Oswald, 2009). Therefore, it is important to create a culture that promotes the alignment of values between the organization, its employees, and other stakeholders. As many businesses redefine their purpose to embed sustainability, board members need to incorporate these changes into a shared purpose and prioritize the long-term in decision-making (Breenen and Skinner, 2021). The view that board decisions should be aligned to organizational purpose is increasingly emphasized in the corporate world. A recent study indicated that most European board members believe that embedding a purpose-driven culture will significantly increase in importance on board agendas within five years (Page, 2020). In addition, previous research by Breenen, Gailey and Wardley (2020) found that purpose energizes leaders and, at the same time, energizing leadership has a positive impact on organizational performance. To fulfill the organization's purpose, boards need to embrace the perspectives of various stakeholder groups and lead by example by genuinely caring for social and environmental issues.

Sustainability offers an opportunity for authentic leadership of board members (Breenen and Skinner, 2021). Authenticity involves being self-aware of one's thoughts, feelings, and values, acting based on one's true preferences, values, and needs, and valuing openness in one's close relationships (Gardner et al, 2011). Several theories of authentic leadership are based on this conceptualization of authenticity (Gardner et al, 2005; Spitzmuller and Ilies, 2010; Walumbwa et al, 2008). Whitehead (2009, p. 850) provided a definition of authentic leadership that includes three components: (i) self-awareness, awareness of those being led, a caring attitude, and a focus on development; (ii) creation of high levels of trust by building an ethical and moral framework; and (iii) commitment to organizational effectiveness grounded in social values. Boards can contribute to the sustainability performance of their companies by raising awareness first about their own purpose (Breenen and Skinner, 2021). Self-awareness, together with a moral perspective, is a basis of authentic leadership that is recognized as a sustainable orientation (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al, 2008). Authentic leadership is key to going beyond compliance-oriented sustainability to achieve genuine sustainability (Lombard, April and Peters, 2012).

Figure 2 provides initial assessment questions related to purpose and authenticity as interrelated sustainability leadership and board dimensions.

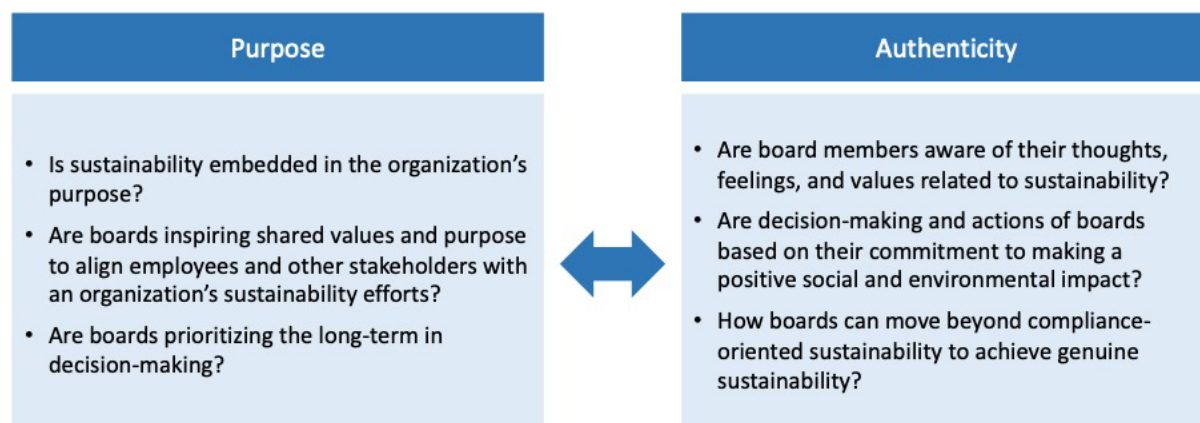


Figure 2: Purpose and authenticity assessment

3. Power and responsibility

Power implies responsibility. Involving and empowering various stakeholders is where boards can use their power for the greatest social and environmental impact. Board members' greater awareness of how collective understanding and action can lead to optimal outcomes provides insight for working with shifting power relationships (Ferdig, 2007). Therefore, the corporate governance structure should allow mechanisms to improve the organization's sustainability performance by supporting broader stakeholder participation (Naciti 2019; Rao and Tilt 2016). The influence of such a structure on ESG responsibility significantly depends on the observed national or transnational context (Romano et al, 2020). As chairs set the board agenda, they can demonstrate their leadership by ensuring that sustainability is part of each critical conversation the board has with the organizational stakeholders including shareholders, impact investors, community leaders, and employee groups (Breedon and Skinner, 2021). To fulfill the organizational purpose and contribute to SDGs, boards should support a shift in power relations by giving more accountability to executive management. In addition, the board of directors' composition needs to be diverse. Prior studies indicate that the presence of female and outside directors on boards is positively associated with sustainability performance (Galletta et al, 2022; Provasi and Harasheh, 2021; Zhang, Zhu and Ding, 2013). Furthermore, the chairs need to foster an inclusive culture in their boardroom, where all directors and other stakeholders feel they can express what may be differing views on the sustainability agenda (Breedon and Skinner, 2021). Boards' clear communication and transparency of sustainability targets, processes, and results are also important in enhancing the engagement of key organizational stakeholders, thereby distributing the power to create a change.

The more power boards have, the more they are responsible for the effective implementation of the sustainability agenda. In addition to embedding sustainability into purpose and prioritizing the long-term, the implementation of the sustainability agenda requires responsible leadership. The concept of responsible leadership puts leader-stakeholder relationships at the center of attention and provides a convincing perspective on how to connect leadership to stakeholder theory (Pless and Maak, 2011). Maak and Pless (2006, p. 101) argue that "building and cultivating ethically sound relationships with different stakeholders is an important responsibility of leaders in an interconnected stakeholder society". These relationships are based on a sense of justice and care, as well as on a commitment to accomplishing a positive social and environmental impact (Pless, 2007). To develop responsible leadership, it is important to clarify what the leader is responsible for and what is the nature of her or his responsibility (Foldoy et al, 2021). Voegtlin et al (2020) found in their research that responsible leadership behavior, facilitated by leader empathy, positive affect, and universal value orientation, is positively related to the leader's perceived effectiveness, favorable stakeholder evaluations, and employee engagement with the organization and society. As organizations try to address new economic, social, and environmental challenges, their leaders are beginning to recognize their responsibility to transform the organizational culture into one that supports sustainable development (Paraschiv et al, 2012).

The initial assessment questions related to power and responsibility as interrelated sustainability leadership and board dimensions are presented in Figure 3.

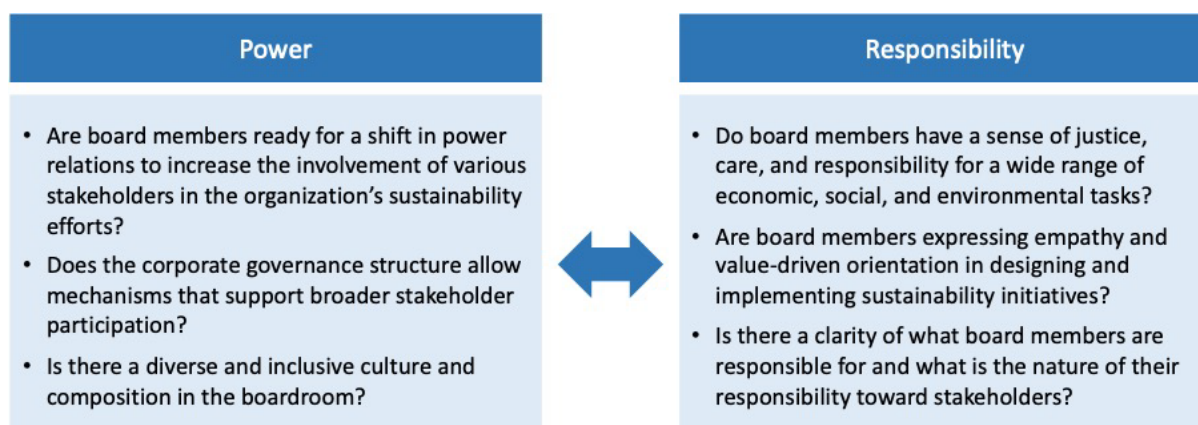


Figure 3: Power and responsibility assessment

4. Process and transformation

Process results in transformation. An understanding of not only what the organization aims to accomplish but also what is the current state is key for embedding sustainability into the board's processes. Therefore, boards need to have an insight into the perceptions and expectations of employees, investors, and other stakeholders regarding the organization's current and potential impact on society and the environment. In addition, they have to continuously monitor the processes related to the implementation of the sustainability agenda. Boards should have frameworks, tools, and metrics to understand the organization's impact and assess how their executives are leading progress toward sustainability targets (Breedon and Skinner, 2021). These frameworks need to provide coherent direction, clear accountability, and flexibility to allow mid-course corrections (Ferdig, 2007). In ensuring effective boardroom decision-making, the role of the board chair is especially important (Tipurić and Cindrić, 2021). When sustainability becomes embedded into the organization's strategy and processes, competencies needed for its effective implementation should also be considered in board recruitment, assessment, development, and succession. All board directors should have foundational sustainability competencies and sector-specific insights that will allow them to make informed ESG-related decisions and inspire organizational transformation toward genuine sustainable development (Breedon and Skinner, 2021). While expertise in compliance policies, impact investing, product and service innovation, as well as other technical aspects of sustainability is important, the ability of boards to engage organizational stakeholders can be considered essential for the effective implementation of the sustainability agenda.

Moving beyond compliance-oriented sustainability toward the citizenship stage that integrates a focus on social and environmental impact (Galpin and Whittington, 2012; Logsdon and Wood, 2002; Mirvis and Googins, 2006) requires a transformation of human resource development practices within the organization. This transformation should originate from boards. They need to provide role-modeling and mentoring to the executive management aimed at increasing their engagement in sustainability efforts. This need to empower the executive management is an opportunity for board members to demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors that include: idealized influence; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; and individualized consideration (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Bass and Riggio, 2006). When these behaviors are authentic, transformational leadership results in improved trust, organizational citizenship behavior, and organizational commitment (Islam, Furuoka and Idris, 2021; Pattnaik and Sahoo, 2021; Udin, 2020). As employees are increasingly valuing sustainability, the empowered executive management should commit to increasing employee engagement which is key to transforming an organization's sustainability mission and strategy into measurable outcomes (Galpin and Whittington, 2012; Temminck, Mearns and Fruhen, 2015).

Figure 4 provides initial assessment questions related to process and transformation as interrelated sustainability leadership and board dimensions.



Figure 4: Process and transformation assessment

5. Conclusion

This study builds on and extends the existing leadership and corporate governance literature by providing a conceptual framework that links sustainability leadership and board dimensions: purpose and authenticity, power and responsibility, and process and transformation. It proposes the initial assessment questions for each dimension that can be further used and refined by other researchers. These research contributions advance the understanding of how boards can view the sustainability agenda as an opportunity to develop and demonstrate specific leadership behaviors. Furthermore, the proposed conceptual and assessment frameworks offer practical implications for various stakeholders. Board members can use them as self-assessment and development tools that can enhance their sustainability engagement and leadership behaviors. Based on these frameworks, human resources management could define sustainability competencies to be considered in board recruitment, assessment, development, and succession. Leadership and organizational development specialists could also use these guidelines to design and implement sustainability leadership development programs. Regarding the limitations of this study, it is important to emphasize that the proposed conceptual framework is not based on an exhaustive literature review, and further study of examined phenomena also requires consideration of organizational behavior theories. Additionally, multiple leadership constructs could be relevant for the selected board dimensions; however, in this study, only one construct is assigned to each dimension to enable focus in the initial phases of leadership assessment and development. Future research could be directed at validating the proposed conceptual framework by conducting qualitative and quantitative studies to explore the board members' perceptions and views on specific leadership behaviors in the context of the sustainability agenda. By offering a novel perspective that links sustainability efforts and leadership behaviors of boards, this conceptual paper could inspire organizations to move beyond compliance-oriented sustainability toward genuine sustainability.

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