# The ‘Me-We-All’-Approach for a more Sustainable and Responsible World

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**Abstract**: It is a fact of life that the world changes. This constant change raises an important question about the role of managers, leaders and organisations in society. Society forms the context for human development. Society, or in a broader sense, the world we live, will always last longer than any individual or organisation. Striving for short-term individual welfare cannot be an objective in the long run. Introducing the ‘Me-We-All’-approach in this opinion paper, we highlight the need to find a balance between individuals and organisations within the ever-changing context of our society. We discuss the role of management and leadership in creating more sustainable organisations and a better world. We analyse the complex relationship between individuals (Me), organisations/communities/networks (We) and society (All). The volatile requirements harm clear objectives/strategies and finding a balance for different perspectives. These stakeholders’ different roles and positions show conflicts of interest, contradicting challenges in a dynamic playing field. Developments within and in the vicinity of organisations demand significantly more attention as they influence organisations with an immense or even disruptive effect on and by individuals. Finally, organisational interactions have emerging impacts on society. Dealing with developments on the three identified levels cannot be elucidated in a single and unified way. We are in the middle of a paradigm shift from a Me-We perspective to a We-All one with attention to sustainability and circularity on a physically finite planet.

**Keywords**: Management, Leadership, Organisation, Society, Sustainability, Me-We-All, paradigm-shift

## 1. Introduction

A fundamental assumption in organisational theory is that organisations form the linking pin between individuals and society, putting the individual in the centre of the universe. Our individualistic society does not help us understand the complexity and future orientation necessary to survive. Too easy does striving for individual welfare lead to conflict, antisocial behaviour. The experiences of neo-liberal society showed that the current ‘me-myself-and-I’ attitude is harmful. Natural resources will be exhausted when individual welfare is the only objective.

This awareness exists already since 1972, when the Club of Rome published the ‘Limits to Growth’ report (Meadows et al., 1972), concluding that without substantial changes in consumption “the most probable result will be a sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity”. It explained the systemic nature of environmental pollution interacting with production and problems interlocking in a global crisis, the necessity to revise the system and shift focus from individual welfare. This knowledge is half a century old. However, subsequent research confirmed that insufficient changes had been made since 1972 to significantly alter nature (Farley, 2008; Meadows & Randers, 2012). Focusing on individual welfare does not automatically lead to sustainable societal developments. Based on this awareness, we must pay attention to how we can align individual behaviour in an organisational context to reach objectives above the personal level.

We aim to contribute to an inclusive and sustainable society in which the world will survive (United Nations, 2018). We must ensure well-being for future generations, shifting the current prevalent focus from individual welfare.

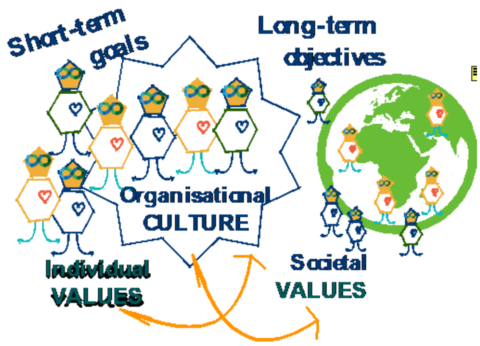


**Figure 1:** Societal culture and values

In modern literature, we see organisations as mechanisms to tune and balance the differences in individual interests. This viewpoint is interesting when we define what an organisation is. In literature, many definitions exist. They usually show similarities with the one below (Abcouwer et al., 2020)

> *An organisation is a structured composition of people and resources opting for fulfilling a (preferably predefined) objective.*

We assume that we must reach something and fulfil an objective and the organisation facilitates individuals to accomplish theirs. The definition above does not mention individuals or their goals but achieving the organisation's. In this light, the main question relates to the forms we base these objectives on. Most answers focus on growth and development. Such linear thinking makes us want to grow, become better, richer, more innovative, increase welfare. Still, this leads back to individual interest. Already in education: after first grade, the second follows, becoming better, wiser, more prosperous, mainly on an individual basis, assuming that developing and getting further is *better*. We believe we can only be successful - or maybe happy - when we reach the objectives set. In this way, linear thinking leads our behaviour in society. But what does this mean for an organisation? Neither the view of an organisation facilitating the individuals nor the individual subordinating the organisation fit any longer. We must let go of both approaches. We need to focus on different aspects relevant to understanding and step away from believing that 'our view is the truth'. We should be open to other ideas about our complex reality (DeNora, 2014).

## 2. Individuals, organisations, society – the 'Me-We-All' principles

In management literature, *organisations* are at the centre stage. We measure their success via profitability, continuity, ownership, shareholder value, - terms as efficacious, the mid-point where society and individuals meet.

Looking at organisations from an individual perspective leads to a confusing picture. What are the different roles of individuals in an organisation? The behavioural theory (Cyert & March, 1963) assumes that an organisation is a coalition of participants. The organisation's role is to give the participant an inducement based on what the participant contributes. The contribution can be working hours, knowledge, ideas for improvements. Motivations include monetary payments, dividends, wages, retirement plans, and immaterial inducements like self-achievement or job satisfaction. Participants are the employees, shareholders, suppliers, customers, or other interested parties.

All stakeholders have their interests in participating in an organisation. They contribute differently and they do not automatically line up for specific interactions and interests. It is difficult to identify who benefits from the organisational activities. Ownership, for example, materialises in profit and shareholder value, which flows back to shareholders. If the organisation is performing well, the shareholders take a high advantage. But their gain depends on economic and societal developments. So, shareholders take chances. Employees with labour contracts have guaranteed income and minimalised risk. This distinction also shows the interaction and interdependency between the stakeholders. The Agency theory (as described in Douma & Schreuder, 1998) shows that interdependency does not automatically lead to optimal behaviour. In practice, one partner's behaviour influences the well-being of the others. When an organisation decides to pay the employees more, the profit will decrease, and the shareholder gets less. However, lowering wages may increase profit but demotivate employees, leading to lower performance. Overall, balancing and synchronisation are topics to be considered.

Identifying the beneficiaries of the social and economic developments is often difficult. Generally, organisations are considered artificial constructs (Law Teacher, 2013). Organisational gain and loss are strange topics when taking on artificial constructs, but work out for the different stakeholders, sometimes with contrary interests in the organisational performance. Does excellent performance or bankruptcy harm an organisation? The owners probably gain an advantage or suffer, as well as the employees and other stakeholders. But the organisation as an artefact? Remarkably, organisational benefits play a central role in economic thinking within contemporary settings. The definition we used earlier has limited value in formulating objectives and success. An organisation making profit doesn't say anything. The translation of *profit* as values to the stakeholders makes it a widely used artefact. However, the impact of organisational performance works on the individuals living in a community or societal setting. Here, we emphasise the societal aspect.

In practice, the performance of an organisation depends on finding a balance between the interests of the different stakeholders, partnering in society outside the organisation (Abcouwer et al., 2022). We face a limited understanding of reality where science reasons the organisational performance. We must look at the world as consisting of communicating vessels, where gain leads to loss somewhere else. The assumption that growth can overcome this zero-sum effect is no longer valid in a setting of limited resources. To understand this reality, we can use the behavioural theory of the firm and the agency theory as described above. Organisational behaviour impacts stakeholders, leading quickly to a divide between individuals.

There has been a growing interest in organisational science for societal divide (Piketty, 2013). Terms like *haves* and *have nots*, digital divide, show attention to the societal impact of individual and organisational actions. A growing awareness arises that behaviour influences individual well-being and the well-being of others, now and in the future. Attention appears on inequality. We increasingly consider it unfair that a part of the population works until death to benefit a limited upper class both nationally, where the growing Gini-coefficient shows a divide and internationally, where the wealthy western world takes an ever-growing part of the societal pie. Fair sharing is not yet a guiding principle in our society. Still not enough attention is paid to the concept of sustainability to ensure that our children will find a better world than the one we got. Therefore, in addition to the distinction between *individuals* (Me) and *organisations* (We), we must pay attention to the *societal* (All) interest.

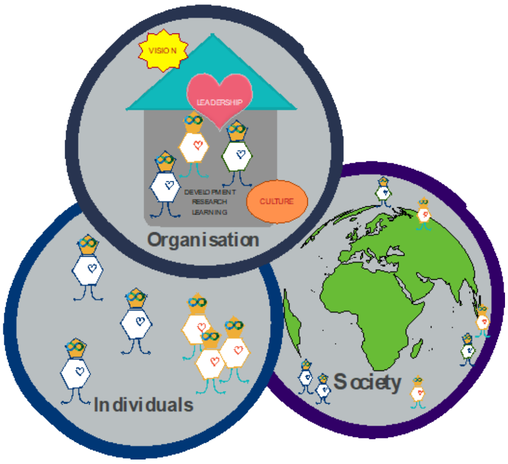


**Figure 2**: 'Me-We-All' – Individuals-Organisations-Society

Reasoning in terms of society, sustainability, and circularity form the overarching principles for the world to survive. This view requires a different perspective on soft elements like *culture* and *companionship*, concepts that gained too little attention in the past where individualism was leading. Let's see the 'Me-We-All' approach in more detail.

### 2.1 The individual perspective – 'Me'

We must reconsider our perception of the world. In the West, individual welfare contributed heavily to the well-being of society. The focus on individual performance assumed that the community gains an advantage. However, it carries a risk of imbalance in society. The difference in capabilities and entrepreneurship leads to growing discrepancies, wealth gaps and distinctions between those who have and who don't. In a world where resources are limited, problems arise as they are no longer abundantly present. Competing for owning the limited resources becomes the next challenge. This phenomenon is evident in international geopolitics. Developments lead to contradictions in which political and economic policies are pursued. Many, with cultural differences in values and norms systems espoused by the various power blocs. (Pippin, 2006) The 'mine and thine' concepts enforce us to ensure our 'haves'. People strive for their interests and personal well-being, especially after World War II. The shortcomings start to be apparent. Economic and technological developments divide threat societal outcomes to a great extent. Ownership and wealth, digital and many more divides limit our abilities to overcome problems by fair sharing, cooperation, future orientation, threatening sustainability in the long run. A logical consequence of economic and societal developments is that only a few own a lot. At the same time, the majority has growing problems assuring that they can live a decent life. The difference between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the wealthy parts of the world is growing tremendously. Still, this development has a vast and unavoidable effect especially on the international level. Huge geopolitical fights take place for conquering ownership of natural resources anywhere in the world.

In this landscape, organisations are used as impersonal contracts to make a clear divide between the owners/shareholders, who in growing number present themselves as philanthropists for a better world, and the organisations representing the devastating effect of their greediness. This development shows that analysing society and the world based on individual interests does not offer a precise mechanism for identifying stakeholders from a future-oriented perspective.


### 2.2 The organisational perspective – 'We'

In literature, scholars often formulate the success of an organisation in Critical Success Factors (CSFs). In LeanSixSigma (Snee, 2010), the method fits into operations management to organise quality and efficiency improvements and systematically innovate processes. The following activities are broadly accepted:

*Stimulate sales and increase turnover&profit:* This CSFs category focuses on realising growth. Big is better is the leading paradigm. It assumes that growth is a necessity for an organisation to survive. But these CSFs do not say how to share the 'wealth' between stakeholders. Does it go to labour or capital?

*Optimise and improve customer satisfaction:* The main idea behind this CSFs category is that the customer is King. This focus on the customer also holds a risk. Destroying the world for improved customer satisfaction is a well-accepted approach. Taking into consideration the impact on other stakeholders is not important.

*Hiring the right employees:* The labour factor is crucial for the organisation. The terminology "hiring" shows the basic assumption of 'Master-subordinate' relationship between labour and capital. Agreed-upon wages pay without considering their contribution and profitability of the organisation. Labour is, in this view, assumed to be fully risk-averse; the shareholder/owner takes all the risk and consequently grabs all the revenues. This CSF lacks attention to societal and environmental impact.

> *Responding to changing stakeholder needs: the labour-capital relationship is not equal in many organisations. The normalised Gini-coefficient measures inequality and shows growing divides.*

*Successful leadership:* We often assume that good management and leadership are critical success factors. But recognising the importance of good management and leadership does not guarantee a fair distribution of revenues within the organisation. In current practice, shareholders as proprietors of the organisation require a maximised payment in a dividend. Managers get strict instructions to maximise the profit, resulting in a high reward. The Agency theory shows clearly why the division of ownership (shareholders) and control (management) does not always work well. Balancing the urge for maximising dividends versus income and bonuses for managers leads to a constant struggle where the production factor labour is often the losing party.

The above success factors make clear that each stakeholder has its interests. Balancing them is an art. The ensuing contradictions manifest in a struggle but do not consider the overarching interests of society. By striving for growth, the parties try to resolve these contradictions. Growth makes it possible for all stakeholders to benefit, but we rarely consider the adverse side effects for society.

Based on the usual factors for success, organisations head for short-term gains. Realising growth is key. The focus is on increasing returns and decreasing costs. However, in current society, the prices of resources organisations usually work with do not reflect the actual costs of the resources. Williamson (1988, 1989) says humans are boundedly rational and sometimes display opportunistic behaviour.

The logic for linear production is based on the full cost of production instead of the total cost of ownership. The negative side-effects are not recognised nor realistically valued. In practice, the interest of one outweighs the interest of the many. (Fiori, 2005). Related to the adage of maximising the prosperity of the individual, a focus on growth is a logical choice. 'More is better' and 'Bigger is more beautiful' are logical consequences of economic development where children in the Western World assume that they will become more prosperous than their parents. After World War II, even doubling that prosperity was more or less common practice. In a world where only 20% of the population consumes 80% of the wealth, it sounds reasonable that the less privileged part of civilians also has the right to enjoy prosperity. That conviction forms the base of the firm belief that growth is necessary. Also, the fast-growing world population requires that development be needed. It makes sense to contrast this logic with David Attenborough opinion: "*Anyone who believes in indefinite growth on a physically finite planet is either mad or an economist*" (Cardwell, 2013). Growing in the traditional sense of using more virgin resources to produce additional products and services to fulfil the growing demands in society has its limits. This approach no longer works to find solutions for realising a just and fair welfare division.

In the light of the above, we need to reconsider the 'me-myself and I' paradigm used in a world of maximising individual prosperity. It will be hard to convince the less privileged that reaching the same level of material wealth is impossible for them. Twenty percent of the world's population consumes 80% of the wealth shows that they are willing to take steps toward a fair share of the limited resources the world can offer. In that respect, thinking about the higher good for society or the world, instead of strictly focusing on individualism, is unavoidable. We must develop new power relations and deal with the existing imbalance. Changes with a comparable speed to deal with the challenges we face nowadays will require a thorough review of our current economic system's paradigms.

To summarise, using only our individual perspectives is not satisfying in our dynamically changing society when the future is sooner than ever.

### 2.3 The societal perspective – 'All'

As an organisation is an artificial construct, it fulfils objectives - explicitly not for itself. (Law Teacher, 2013). A broadly used assumption is that the wealth generated by optimal performing organisations in contemporary society mainly heads for maximising individual prosperity. This approach raises several questions.

This single-sided approach does not reflect the growing awareness we nowadays see in the actual behaviour of organisations. In a sense, we become increasingly aware that organisations play an intermediary role between individuals (with straightforward identifiable objectives) and society (with more diffuse objectives). Organisations form a mechanism for coordinating activities to reach a balanced result for individuals and society. Formulating objectives in such a setting is more complicated than the individual perspective. When we can identify a crystal-clear objective, for example, maximising personal prosperity, organising relevant activities is relatively simple. When we look from the standpoint of society, we must consider different - often contradicting - objectives. Using the term *objectives*, or broader *strategy*, is confusing (Abcouwer et al., 2020). Culture, justice, other value-and-norm systems, and differences in ethics influence the organisation's behaviour. In a setting like this, many parties work together, network structures are leading, and there is no clear network leader in most cases.

The practical situation of conflicting objectives is even more confusing in our fast-changing context. Dynamics and cultural differences force society to network/cooperate where limited and unclear mutual interests exist. In a setting where higher societal demands are growingly important, irrationality and unpredictability are key issues. (Takács et al., 2019) The problems are so complex that an ongoing process of specialisation guides developments while we do not know where it leads. Mutual interdependencies and changing dominant societal/network problems 'leads' them in varying directions.

The power of individuals, their contribution to the organisation and the intention to fulfil objectives for the world form a complex setting where neither traditional point at the horizon (objectives), nor the way to reach them (strategy), exist.

In such a setting, the current reality is the absence of hierarchical relationships and the constant changing combinations of partners. While depending on the context, striving to realise societal objectives override personal goals is a challenge in the contemporary world. These are all reasons for reconsidering the way how stakeholders work together. (Abcouwer et al., 2022) Constantly changing requirements for all participants enforce a setting where continuous learning should be essential to future adaptability. In such a scene, bureaucracy and a heavy binding to strictly formulated objectives limit the freedom of thoughts and creativity based on a free circulation of knowledge, information and ideas. (Schilstra et al., 2021)

## 3. Towards a more sustainable and responsible world

*Balancing* between individuals, organisations, and society is not simple. The Dutch tradespeople's motto for a better future, *Luctor et emergo*: struggle and emerge, helps us define key concepts to understand the different stakeholder perspectives. Without a logical order, here are some:
*Culture* encompasses social behaviour, values and norms and is present in individuals' knowledge, beliefs, customs, capabilities, and habits. We base our legislation, arts and learning on it. The aboriginals, for example, view learning differently. We must keep in mind that every culture on its own has its value. There is no culture better than the other one.

*Future orientation* is usually along with purposeful planning via *strategy and identity.* Since the Ancient Greeks, we strive to reach somewhere in the *future*. In contemporary society, such a point at the horizon does not exist. The availability of knowledge, skills, visions, values, norms represents the willingness to strive for the greater good. A strategy usually has a short-term orientation and does not consider the bigger picture important. Long-term thinking often focuses on continuity, surviving under changing circumstances, but still, in most cases aiming at the welfare of the individual or their groups. In current Western culture, that every individual has a task to contribute on a personal basis to the well-being of the whole is far from broadly accepted. However, in a world where resources are limited, we must ensure that we aren't mad or economists, as we quoted Sir David Attenborough earlier. Currently, individuals lack mechanisms to contribute to the needs of the many. Compared to an Inuit society where the elderly leaves the community when they cannot contribute to the well-being of the society anymore, the difference between Western culture is evident.

*Structures to attack the future:* Dealing with challenges, we develop structures to solve them. Traditional hierarchy and control-based principles founded organisational structures do not form a solid base for the issues at stake. de Geus (1989) thoroughly analysed 2500 years of political philosophy and defined a typology with three approaches to organising organisations. Keidel (1995) came to similar principles. Both authors identified three primary forms of organising structure aiming at *co-creation* for dealing with challenges. *Control* based working leads to hierarchical structures where a leader takes responsibility for the future behaviour of the community. As the second form, *Cooperation* takes advantage of the competencies, abilities, and resources available in the community where everyone contributes to their best abilities. The third basic form is *Autonomy*, where everyone strives to fulfil their objectives to their best. In the practice of an actual organisation, all three need to be present. Based on the organisation's context, only a bias into the direction of one of these ideal forms should be strived for.

*Cooperation and synchronisation:* success requires cooperation. From a societal point of view, working on one societal objective only works on a very high abstraction level: the needs of the many. Aligning all individuals with the societal objective is extremely hard. Individual needs are different and dependent on that individual's specific context. Striving to align those objectives requires a strict hierarchy with a high level of control or a highly developed way of cooperation. Consultation lead partners agree on their objectives. Autonomous work can also lead to great results. In this case, we assume that everyone can decide what is best for reaching results. This form of working alongside each other may lead to emergent behaviour in the organisation. So, cooperation and synchronisation of the activities may be centrally enforced (control), or working together (cooperation), or the participants' autonomy leads to emerging behaviour. For success, trust is the key principle.

*Trust, emergent behaviour and believing in each other*: In sociology, trust is supposed to be a social construct. Trust deals with the interaction of people working together. Science distinguishes between a trustor (is trusting someone) and a trustee (is being trusted by someone). Honesty, fairness, or benevolence appear when people cooperate. The more trust there is, the less need is for control. When partners trust each other, strict steering is not necessary. Trust thus forms the base for reaching results. Lencioni (2002) states that it is the basis for effectiveness. When people trust each other, they also have a sound base for disagreeing. Conflicting opinions help exploit creativity within the organisation. And by the commitment, partners show their willingness to make themselves accountable for reaching results effectively.

By letting loose the need for control, another phenomenon appears. Less control leads to unpredictability making room for emergent behaviour. We use the term emergence aiming at an organisational behaviour that depends on the relationship between one another and not on its cooperating parts. The individual behaviour of any participant is not related to the realisation of an overall high-level objective. Here autonomous behaviour of the participants leads to unforeseen and potentially highly appreciated outcomes. These are only possible when there is trust in each other's behaviour. When people work together without having an explicit agreement on the result, individual activities contribute to the emerging development. However, lacking central objectives may lead people run the 100 meters without any sense of direction. Often, a leading high-level principle needs to be inherently available based on cultural backgrounds.

*Circularity:* A challenge for modern society is the survival of humanity. The global population grows rapidly, increasing demands for (virgin) raw materials while supplies of those resources are decreasing. Sustainability recently became a term to describe principles for actions to avoid the depletion of natural resources, keep an ecological balance, harmony with nature that doesn't allow the quality of life of modern societies to decrease. Sustainability is a reminder of the limitation of natural resources, the need for a balanced and aligned coexistence that humankind has to maintain its existence and commonly acknowledged values. Circularity is a solution to the challenges of sustaining our planet. Many governments are heading for and working with industry to ensure that society runs on reusable materials. In such an economic system, there will be no waste. The community will reuse resources again and again. The term *circularity* identifies this cooperation.

*Interaction and dependency:* The trinity of *individual-organisation-society* depends on the interaction between the participants. Since Erasmus, we have long passed the times when one person knows everything and can do everything. Being dependent on each other is a reality of the day. Interacting with others is the basis for our current functioning. Even though this interdependency makes us work together to reach individual prosperity, we also fight for the shared objectives. Looking from different perspectives, we must be aware of the stakeholders' different positions, goals, and roles.

To summarise, we need to earn the level of development when we are able to understand and act towards a more sustainable and responsible world. It is only possible to reach this level when we are grown to see and balance the different perspectives of individuals, organisations and the society.

## 4. The role of management, leadership and governance

Change is a fact of life. There is nothing more consistent than change, which management and leadership must deal with (Takacs & Abcouwer, 2020). The anchor point for interventions is balancing within the 'Me-We-All' approach.

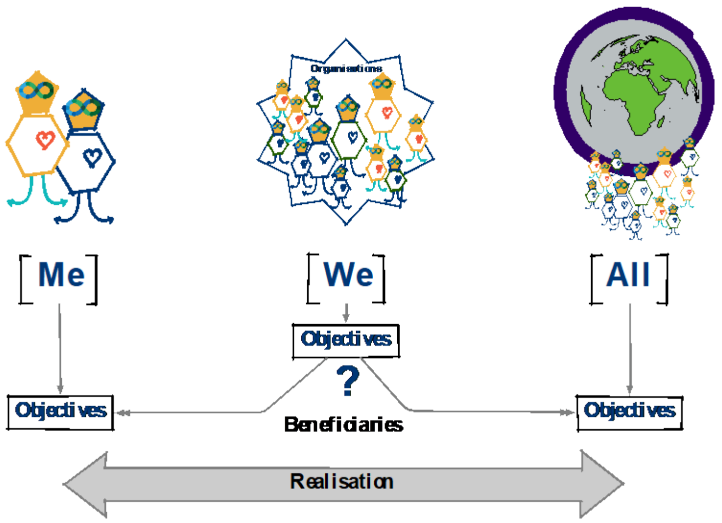


**Figure 4:** Balancing the objectives

The different levels bare different objectives with a question of who the beneficiaries are. Benefits for 'Me' or 'All' is clear, but for the community, the 'We' level it is more complicated. It is either the individuals or the society who take advantage of the organisations' functioning. We ask attention to balancing the different objectives as a requirement for managers and leaders. When an organisation (meaning its manager or leader along with the staff) chooses to play a societal role, it does not necessarily harm the individuals' well-being. In practice, it is often easy to recognise the general focus (Scharmer & Yukelson, 2015). Many organisations are profit-oriented with social awareness elements. Corporate social responsibility while fulfilling customer needs (Ellis, 2014), caring for the well-being of employees emerge. The skill to analyse the complex relationship between individuals (Me), organisations/communities/networks (We) and society (All) and understand in time the volatile requirements for objectives and strategies is an art of managing the organisational balance between the different perspectives. These stakeholders' different roles and positions show conflicts of interest, contradicting challenges in a dynamic playing field. In this sense, the role of management and leadership in creating more sustainable organisations and a better world is apparent. Developments within and in the vicinity of organisations demand significantly more attention by managers and leaders, as they influence organisations with an immense or even disruptive effect on and by individuals (Takács & Abcouwer, 2020). The role of governance also appears as organisational interactions have emerging impacts on society (Chandler, 2014). Although the highlight to develop the capability in the organisation to deal with challenges on the three identified levels, cannot be elucidated in a single and unified way. We see that we are in the middle of a paradigm shift from a 'Me-We' perspective to a 'We-All' one with attention to sustainability and circularity on a physically finite planet.

We introduce a clear need for initiating research on processes for management and leadership to balance between 'Me-We-All'. This emphasis should also be embedded in a newly developed governance structure to ensure this balance.

## 5. Conclusion

In our opinion paper, we described the complex relationship between individuals, organisations/ communities/ networks, and society, where stakeholders/participants keep changing. Volatile requirements and unclear objectives make it hard to balance the 'Me- We-All' perspectives, and it asks for attention to the emerging roles of management, leadership and governance.

The different perspectives generate conflicts in interests. The challenges are even more contradicting when we consider dynamics. Developments demand more attention because of their disruptive effect on all levels. Interactions affect our society, which makes managers and leaders take responsibility. Dealing with them on the three identified levels is necessary for a sustainable future. We are in the middle of a paradigm shift where the individual interests should change to a global one with growing attention to sustainability, circularity and responsible management, leadership and governance, which are necessary on a physically finite planet.

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