

Organizational Culture and Leadership for Sustainability from a Work and Organizational Psychology perspective

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Abstract

In the past two decades, sustainability has gained significant attention, influencing global agendas. This paper examines the relationship between Governance for Sustainability (GfS) and organizational dynamics through the lens of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP). While existing literature predominantly focuses on macro-level governance, this study addresses the overlooked micro and meso levels. By exploring dimensions such as culture and leadership, it sheds light on critical issues for organizations navigating sustainable change. Emphasis is placed on the "human factor" and its connection to WOP. Implications for research and practice are discussed, with a focus on advancing the GfS field through WOP themes.

Keywords: Governance for Sustainability; Work and Organizational Psychology; Organizational culture; Leadership; Sustainability; Governance.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, the topic of sustainability has increasingly attracted the attention of academics, policy makers and practitioners,

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sparkling an interdisciplinary discourse that now influences strategic agendas at a global level (Di Fabio, Rosen, 2018). The concept of sustainability goes beyond the traditional focus on environmental and ecological aspects and embraces a comprehensive and integrated approach that also includes social and economic dimensions (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010), addressing the well-being of individuals, organizations and society in general. In this scenario, where environmental awareness, social responsibility, and economic governance are central, organizations play a crucial role in promoting a sustainable future.

This paper attempts to unravel the intricate interplay between governance for sustainability and organizational dynamics by delving into the field of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP). In the literature, the focus is usually on the macro level, i.e. the highest levels of governance systems and dynamics, while little attention is paid to the micro and meso levels (Perkins and Nachmany, 2019; Schill et al., 2019).

Based on this consideration, our paper examines the importance of dimensions such as organizational and individual behavior, organizational culture, and leadership, drawing on the existing literature in the field of organizational studies on sustainability and in the context of WOP. First, the topics of sustainability and GfS are examined with a special focus on their often neglected “human factor” and its connection to WOP. Subsequently, the topic of organizational culture and leadership in connection with GfS will be examined in greater depth. The aim is to present key issues for organizations dealing with sustainable change and for research in this area, addressing aspects such as complexity, change, and inclusion in their interaction with organizational culture and leadership. Finally, implications for research and practice are presented. The focus of this paper on the fundamental role of WOP themes in sustainability, such as organizational culture and leadership, contributes to the further development of the GfS field.

In fact, as organizations increasingly grapple with the complexities of a rapidly changing global landscape, the need for a governance for sustainability which encourages and enables sustainable practices should be an ethical obligation and a strategic imperative. Indeed, organizations are increasingly seeking to measure, report and highlight their concrete commitments to combating climate change and promoting sustainability. At a global level, for example, 61% of companies have obtained an Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) committee (CECP, 2020), a recognized framework that organizations use to disclose their sustainability performance. However, it is important that these types of certifications and the visibility they can provide do not become the ultimate goal of

organizational efforts to conform to a bureaucratic culture. Rather, certifications should only be a tool for transparency, accountability and benchmarking in the pursuit of common sustainability goals. Organizations' actions should be embedded in an authentic sustainability culture and driven by coherent leadership capable of communicating values, beliefs, and norms, influencing decision-making processes and stakeholder engagement in the adoption and implementation of sustainable governance practices (Aguinis and Glavas, 2019; Schein, 2010).

2. Governance for Sustainability and Work and Organizational Psychology

2.1 Sustainability

Although the term “sustainability” is being used more and more frequently, there is some confusion about its meaning. Sustainability is commonly defined as «the degree to which a process or enterprise is able to be maintained or continued while avoiding the long-term depletion of natural resources» (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022), has been articulated in more than 300 different ways in the literature (Maggiolini and Tecco, 2019). For several years, attempts have been made to narrow down and decode the word sustainability (e.g. Brown, et al., 1987).

The first definition of sustainable development can be found in the report “Our Common Future” (also known as the Brundtland Report, after the name of the head of the commission), produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. They were faced with the challenge of reconciling global aspirations for a better life with limited natural resources and the dangers of environmental degradation. Their solution was formulated as sustainable development, defined as progress that meets the needs of the present while ensuring the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010). Despite its vagueness, the Brundtland definition of sustainability is often used because it has a broad scope and introduces the fundamental theme of intergenerational equity (Emas, 2015; Tenuta, 2009), focusing on the conservation of resources, the improvement of quality of life, and equitable access to environmental resources for future generations (Tenuta, 2009).

Since the Brundtland Report, sustainability has been conceptualized in terms of three interconnected dimensions – social, economic, and environmental – which must be in balance (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010). Various models such as the “triple bottom line” by Elkington (1994) illustrate

the connection between these areas of sustainability (Maggiolini, Tecco, 2019). Kuhlman and Farrington (2010) take a critical look at the effects of a three-dimensional approach to sustainability. They argue that a three-dimensional model gives too little weight to the environmental dimension, as both the social and economic dimensions are related to human well-being and thus conflict with environmental priorities. In contrast, the authors propose replacing the traditional social and economic dimensions of sustainability with a single dimension, "well-being", in order to bring transparency to the policy formulation process by clearly distinguishing between the two concerns of well-being and sustainability. The debate on the conceptualization of sustainability is therefore complex and still open, and it is intertwined with the "human factor" and the concepts of well-being and happiness.

The human factor in all aspects of sustainability requires an appropriate culture and effective leadership to guide sustainable transformations, especially with regard to the sustainability of organizational life (Di Fabio and Rosen, 2018, Molino et al., 2019, Baumgartner, 2009).

In WOP research, the concept of sustainability is often declined as sustainability of organizational life and linked to the topics of well-being and quality of working life. Sustainability in organizational life means promoting well-being and healthy cultures, emphasizing meaningful work experiences and positive narratives that can inspire hope and success, and changing cultures to promote diversity and enhance performance (Di Fabio, 2017). Addressing unsustainable dynamics in organizations, such as negative leadership styles, is critical to ensuring employee well-being under changing work conditions (Molino et al., 2019). Considering organizational life as a component of the corporate sustainability framework seems particularly crucial for workplace psychologists to create organizations in which sustainability is a fundamental value of organizational culture and thus permeates all processes and levels of the organization, including those related to the sustainability of organizational life.

2.2 Governance for Sustainability

According to scientific literature, governance plays a very important role for organizations embarking on the path to sustainability. The concept of governance can be defined as «the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs including both formal, i.e., codified, and informal mechanisms» (Commission on Global Governance 1995, p. 4). Governance, in other words, is «a set of regulations, stakeholder engagement, and procedures aimed at achieving a shared

objective» (van Zeijl-Rozema et al., 2008, p. 411). Governance, as sustainability, inherently encompasses multiple dimensions and involves different decision makers, stakeholders, processes and hybrid practices (Glass and Newig, 2019; Kemp et al., 2005). In contrast to government, which implies static, easily identifiable, and formal structures that rule over people, governance emphasizes the importance of both formal and informal arrangements where power is exercised through a network of interconnected actors who use knowledge resources, financial means, and rights granted to them (Kemp et al., 2005). This comparison implicitly recognizes the need to move from an outdated form of government to a more adaptable and flexible model of governance capable of managing the diverse debates of contemporary society. This need for change is repeatedly emphasized in discussions of governance (Kemp, Martens, 2007; Kemp et al., 2005).

On the one hand, effective governance can contribute to the sustainability performance of organizations. The study by Gueney (2017) describes the positive effects of governance on sustainable development that can be observed in both developed and developing countries. According to the author, the improvement of governance levels is crucial for the protection of resources and wellbeing. On the other hand, governance can be explicitly dedicated to sustainability, which is defined as Governance for Sustainability (GfS) or similar terms. Several authors have attempted to codify the characteristics that GfS should have in order to achieve effective and efficient outcomes. The key components listed by Kemp and colleagues (2005) are based on the concept of good governance defined by the European Commission, which emphasizes openness, participation, responsibility, effectiveness, and coherence. At the same time, they take into account the requirements of sustainable development, including collaboration not only with formal but also with informal institutions, a coherent vision, involvement, and the ability to coordinate and realign. On the basis of these fundamental indications, some characteristics of the GfS are outlined below.

- Policy Integration: essential in order to address common problems and implement coordinated solutions, counteracting the prevailing trend of sectoralization and specialization. This includes vertical and horizontal aspects such as the consideration of environmental impacts, dialog systems, sectoral strategies, long-term sustainability planning, governing bodies, communication programs, evaluation, and conflict resolution.
- Common Objectives, Criteria, Trade-offs, and Indicators: key tools for applying policy on a large scale and promoting sustainable behaviors. These include common sustainable goals at different levels, sustainability criteria for planning, explicit negotiation rules, and indicators that drive

sustainable development efforts and promote education and empowerment.

- Information and Incentives for Practical Implementation: integrated, context-adapted tools are critical for sustainability-oriented decision-making that uses information to create systems that incentivize sustainable behaviors.
- Programs for System Innovation: transitioning to innovative systems is crucial for long-term sustainability. Anticipatory governance focused on learning and innovation should revolutionize knowledge, rules, roles, linkages and organizations, with an emphasis on reflexivity.

In addition, Glass and Newig (2019) examined empirical data and theories to develop a list of characteristics, some of which overlap with those of Kemp et al. (2005), that GfS must have in order to contribute effectively to achieving the SDGs.

- Participation: intrinsic to the definition of governance, forming the basis for the development of a collaborative governance model, which is essential for tackling complex problems such as the SDGs.
- Policy Coherence: linked to the need to coordinate policies in order to harmonize the actions of different actors and achieve the overall goals.
- Reflexivity and Adaptation: previously mentioned in Kemp's typology, they are central to the development of critical self-awareness and the ability to change existing ways and behaviors.
- Democratic Institutions: elements that characterize such institutions include freedom of expression, electoral processes, access to and diverse contributions to information, recognition of civil rights, political freedom, and the power of the law.

Although there is a growing body of literature on GfS, particularly in the area of corporate governance and sustainability (Naciti et al., 2022), research in this area often neglects the human, psychological, and relational aspects of the phenomenon (Pfeffer, 2010). Baker-Shelley and colleagues (2017) conducted a study examining sustainability governance and transformation in higher education, using a comprehensive framework that encompasses the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. Their study highlights the complex relationships between individual behavior, organizational dynamics, and external influences at these different levels, and underlines the urgent need to pay more attention to the micro and meso levels, which are often overlooked in research (Pfeffer, 2010). Psychology emerges as a key tool to study these overlooked dimensions, especially with regard to individual behavior, organizational dynamics, and their interplay (Baker-Shelley et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the link between topics traditionally explored in psychology, such as emotions and affect, and those in WOP, such as participation and team cohesion, also extends to the macro level of interorganizational connections, as demonstrated by the research of Perkins and Nachmany (2019). This study highlights the social and emotional dynamics inherent in networking endeavors and their influence on climate governance. It suggests that recognizing the emotional and affective dimensions of participation in such initiatives can deepen our understanding of people's motivation to take climate action. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of capturing the psychological aspects of esprit de corps and collective identity within transnational network initiatives to foster commitment, dedication, and action towards achieving national climate goals (Perkins and Nachmany, 2019).

Although several researchers argue that governance and sustainability are inherently «a very human business» (Perkins and Nachmany, 2019), ideally suited for examination through the WOP perspective, especially in the context of organizations, the discourse on GfS in the academic literature continues to emphasize mainly the managerial aspects. As a result of this trend, there is no structured collection of WOP knowledge on GfS.

2.3 Work and Organizational Psychology and Sustainability

Although WOP does not yet have a firm place in the GfS academic literature, psychology more broadly has quite a rich history in the study of sustainability and governance. Di Fabio and Rosen (2018) speak of the “psychology of sustainability and sustainable development” as a new area of research within sustainability science that contributes to the transdisciplinary approach by providing a stable, integrated, and non-occasion-specific key to interpreting phenomena from a psychological and behavioral perspective. This perspective is also fundamental with regard to environmental sustainability, as psychological processes guide and support environmental choices and behaviors, influence the diffusion of a culture of sustainability, and highlight the importance of the construction of representations and meanings related to the ecological transition (Di Fabio and Rosen, 2018).

In addition to its contribution to the scientific and research dimension, Vlek (2000) emphasizes the practical role of psychology in shaping environmental policy, especially with regard to complex long-term environmental issues. The collaboration of psychologists with scientists from other fields dealing with environmental issues is based on an awareness of the limitations and potential risks associated with the promotion of environmental policies based solely on technical or economic strategies: this

awareness must therefore be acquired by local and international decision-makers in order to assess problems with an integrated approach and to design flexible and complex solutions.

Furthermore, Coglianese and Starobin (2020) emphasize the importance of social sciences, including psychology, in studying and addressing environmental policy issues.

The systematic review recently published by Freschi et al. (2023) reports on 52 studies dealing with climate change governance and psychology. The study distinguishes three main thematic clusters, each emphasizing different psychological aspects: determinants of pro-environmental behavior, individual perceptions and perspectives, and group-based processes. Key psychological theories and frameworks include the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Model of Private Proactive Adaptation to Climate Change, construal-level theory, theory of social representations, the social norm paradigm from the theory of normative conduct, and decision-making theories. Despite the extensive analysis of the relationship between psychology and sustainability, this review does not consider the contribution of WOP to GfS. Instead, it focuses on the broader contribution of psychology to addressing the challenges of climate change, making evident a lack of WOP's contributions and themes to GfS.

Just as there is a need for in-depth analysis of the micro and meso levels by psychological disciplines in the study of GfS (Baker-Shelley et al., 2017), psychological studies on sustainability also lack an examination of these levels and their interrelationships, which lends itself to analysis by WOP.

The starting point for this paper is therefore a gap in the academic literature, which lacks structured and codified attention to WOP models and dimensions, especially organizational culture and leadership, when addressing GfS issues. Currently, there is still no systematic theoretical and empirical corpus on culture and leadership for sustainability (Baumgartner, 2009; Ketprapakorn and Kantabutra, 2022), although they play an essential role in sustainable transformation. In particular, a systematic proposal that incorporates the perspective of work and organizational psychology is lacking (Sacchi et al., 2023), as evidenced by the difficulty in identifying specific contributions in the databases, even when combining different keywords. Our contribution aims to address this gap and contribute to the development of organizational thinking, research, and practice in these dimensions.

3. Organizational culture and leadership in Governance for Sustainability through the Work and Organizational Psychology lens

The importance of WOP for GfS can be seen in some of its most important fields of action: leadership, organizational behavior, organizational culture, complexity, communication, and change management, which are located at a middle – meso – level, between the micro level of individuals and the macro level of connections between organizations (Baker-Shelley et al., 2017). These objects of action and research serve as an intersection, located in organizations, between what happens in people's mental world, how they act, and how their behavior can impact society. When discussing barriers to action on climate change, it is important to consider the complex relationship between psychological tendencies, social relationships, and societal structures (Schmitt et al., 2020). Psychologists engaged in climate change action should broaden their perspective beyond individual consumer behavior and household contexts to conduct psychological research that challenges current power dynamics and opens up the potential for transformative social change (Schmitt et al., 2020). To contextualize behavior change and its effects, meso-level factors at the community or organizational level must also be considered by drawing on disciplines such as psychology and addressing areas such as governance (Newell et al., 2021).

Tackling climate change requires significant changes in behavior that go beyond individual consumer actions: individuals also act as investors, producers, and participants in emissions-intensive organizations, thereby influencing organizational decisions and political structures. However, existing behavioral models are often reductionist and individualistic and lack a broader perspective that takes into account the societal and organizational context, which requires the attention of organizational psychologists (Whitmarsh et al., 2021; Nielsen, et al., 2020).

Given the importance of GfS at the meso-level, it is therefore essential for WOP (Nielsen et al., 2020) to integrate it into its framework in order to make a meaningful contribution to sustainability and climate issues, acknowledging the complementarity between individual-oriented analyzes and the study of organizational and political actions. In our operationalization of the meso-level, represented by organizations, key WOP topics such as leadership, organizational behavior, culture, communication, and change management play a central role.

Young et al. (2015) examined pro-environmental behaviors in the workplace and identified several important variables, of which only leadership (referred to as “management support” in the study) and

organizational culture closely aligned with the framework proposed in WOP. In addition, Baumgartner had pointed out in 2009 that the relationship between organizational culture, leadership and corporate sustainability is underestimated in the discussion on sustainable development. Linked to this is a lack of attention to the role of culture in sustainability by those with governance roles. On the other hand, culture would be crucial for GfS, especially if it is able to integrate sustainability values into the corporate vision and strategy.

Based on these considerations, we focus primarily on the dimension of organizational culture and leadership within organizations to understand its interplay with all other variables mentioned and their influence on the promotion of sustainable practices, fostering organizational values of sustainability, and driving change toward sustainability goals. By focusing on the dynamics of culture and leadership within organizations, WOP can effectively analyze and intervene in the complex interplay between individual behaviors, organizational structures, and social impacts to ultimately facilitate the transition to more sustainable practices in organizations and society at large.

Because of their central importance to GfS, organizational culture and leadership are the cornerstones on which we build our perspective for examining GfS through the lens of WOP. In the following sections, we draw on relevant position papers and research that address the human and relational aspects of sustainable change in the organizational context and highlight key themes for developing a self-reflection tool to guide organizations undergoing this change towards informed GfS practice. Our presentation aims to advance the discourse on GfS in WOP literature, which remains underdeveloped and lacks structure. Our proposal focuses on the topics of organizational culture and leadership and extends to other aspects of WOP, such as organizational values, complexity, organizational change, reflexivity, and inclusion, all of which are geared toward promoting GfS.

3.1. Key themes for approaching GfS from a WOP perspective

3.1.1 Organizational culture for GfS

Sustainability – also from the perspective of those who observe Organizations and Organizing, and of those who build and define them (Weick, 1992) – has the multi-layered and complex meaning of social sustainability (in relation to the socio-legal context in which it operates), environmental sustainability (in relation to the territory in which it is located), economic sustainability (in relation to its economic framework)

(Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010), and organizational sustainability in the narrower sense (in relation to the people who work in that context).

This specific content focuses on organizational sustainability and in particular on the interdependent relationship between leadership, those who exercise leadership on a daily basis, and organizational culture (Baumgartner, 2009). Namely, between the leaders (this is not just about hierarchical responsibility) who help to build, disseminate, and pass on values, «the way we work around here», and finally the assumptions that give meaning to action (Schein, 1999) and that are associated with sustainability. Organizational culture is the DNA of Weick's concept of Organizing (1992): it is generated, transmitted, and becomes an action through the concatenated and recursive behaviors of all people working in an Organizing. Culture – constantly and in every role – determines and is determined by leadership, which is expressed and accepted in daily actions (Schein, 2019). Furthermore, organizational culture is an essential part and at the same time a guiding pattern of the framework of meaning (Weick, 1995) that people build and use on an individual, team, organizational, and even cultural and more abstract level. They need culture to explain what they do, what they see, what they want to do, and, above all, to explain their enactments, namely the changes that they take from their environment (Weick, 1992) and which are observed again.

Sustainability in this historical moment is just that: an enactment, a clue drawn from the flow of social, political, scientific, task-environment-related, and managerial-related experience, which is re-observed to create sense and meaning of each Organizing, for each Organization. We can hypothesize about the framework of Meaning that drives people to (also) extract sustainability issues – oriented by organizational culture – from their context. One of the most typical guiding patterns concerns problems of external survival (Schein, 1999, 2019) and how they are addressed and solved at a deeper level (Mission, Strategy, Objectives, Means, Error Assessment), within the assumptions related to «human relationships with nature».

This perspective allows us to observe and understand some alternative ways of dealing with the issue of sustainability. Greenwashing, for example, is an approach to adaptation problems: adapting to current trends without corresponding changes in cultural orientation or genuine sustainability-oriented measures. In these cases, the organization's mission, goals, strategies, and means remain largely unchanged, while only the image of services and products is altered. In other cases, some organizations are primarily concerned with bureaucratic compliance just to obtain sustainability certifications (e.g. ESG reports). However, there are cases where it is possible to observe changes in strategy and investments

modifications, oriented to meet the social, environmental, and political (*polis*-related) demand for sustainability.

The other cultural guiding pattern that – also – guides the elaboration of sustainability is the one associated with problems of internal integration (language, borders and group identity) (Schein, 1999, 2019). Within this framework, assumptions about the «nature of authority and relationships» can be identified, primarily recalling the role of leadership (including role responsibility) in promoting, interpreting, and proposing the issue of sustainability within the organization. In a leadership culture focused on power and purpose, outcome and role (Schein, 2019), sustainability is integrated into the organizational culture, transforming it into a culture of change if it aligns with the leader's interests and objectives. In a culture of participative leadership and followership, geared towards trust and empowerment, sustainability is collectively elaborated within the organizational culture by engaging in collaborative and intentional sensemaking activities aimed at shaping the future. In organizational terms, we don't believe that the culture of sustainability can be limited to reducing document printing; instead, we believe it translates concretely into a broad and articulated journey towards a People-Oriented Organizing. This means, for example, that leaders and managers, starting with HR, must promote a talent management system that fosters diversity and talents of all employees.

Sustainability must therefore be understood through culture and promoted by leaders: sustainability leaders as leaders of cultural change and learning (Schein, 2019). Only recently, some authors have proposed a systematic reflection on an organizational theory of sustainable culture (Ketprapakorn and Kantabutra, 2022), built around the dimensions of values and beliefs, vision and communication. In summary, sustainability is interpreted and enacted in very different ways in each Organizing. Its meaning and impact vary in each context due to the unique interdependence and expression of culture and leadership. However, leadership plays a central role in organizational sustainability (Baumgartner, 2009), the discussion of which is about addressing the shift to sustainability: a new approach to solving the challenges of adaptation that encompasses both issues of external survival and internal integration.

3.1.2. GfS Leadership

Leadership is an important factor for sustainability: it influences the communication of the organization's commitment to sustainability, the development of sustainable practices, and their implementation (Epstein, 2008). Effective and consistent leadership can align organizational goals

with social and environmental concerns, and the internal credibility that good leadership brings serves as a driver for the transition to a more socially and environmentally sustainable management style (Epstein, 2008). Furthermore, leadership is the organizational lever that can change the corporate culture, which in turn affects the behavior of individual employees, as well as the ability to integrate sustainability into management decisions at all levels of the organization (Epstein, 2008).

Moreover, a link between leaders' values, democratic leadership and the implementation of sustainable measures was observed in Swedish and Austrian organizations (Nedelko and Potocan, 2021). Effective and coherent leadership facilitates the harmonization of business objectives with social and environmental concerns (Epstein, 2008).

Participation is also a key element in improving sustainability, but bottom-up initiatives must be supported by top management to be legitimized and formalized (Richardson and Lynes, 2007; Lozano, 2006). Top management should make decisions related to sustainability by clarifying policy goals and timetables for action, considering development at different levels and in different contexts, setting innovative and proactive long-term goals, collaborating with scientists (Kemp and Martens, 2007), and relying on complexity and solidarity (Martínez de Anguita et al., 2007).

Leadership also has a link to GfS: it is able to drive sustainability frameworks within corporate governance, highlighting vision, mission, and leadership as key factors (E-Vahdati et al., 2018). However, leadership can also be seen as a potential weak point in establishing ethical foundations within organizations: for this reason, strong leadership – in combination with governance and ethics – is required to effectively manage the complexity of GfS (Bloomfield, 2022).

In the discourse on leadership, it is of course fundamental to focus on positive behaviors (Monzani and Van Dick, 2020) that contribute to organizational sustainability, i.e. the leadership actions that are aligned with the vision of sustainability and lead people towards this “goal”. However, it is equally important to be aware that those who hold leadership roles in organizations do not always exert a positive influence: studies on destructive leadership have shown that hypercontrol, micromanagement and unsupportive behaviors, which are far from rare in organizations (Dolce et al., 2020), are associated with significant unsustainability in organizational life (Molino et al., 2019) and can be detrimental to sustainable transformation.

Numerous authors have suggested leadership traits that are conducive to sustainability. Mahran and Elamer (2023) conduct a systematic literature review to provide a comprehensive examination of the relationship between

CEO personality and environmental sustainability. Most of the studies examined were based on the Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick, Mason, 1984), according to which the characteristics of top managers tend to influence strategic decisions at the organizational level. The 139 articles examined from the last ten years deal with demographic factors (such as age, background, and experience), aspects of compensation, and psychological characteristics (such as emotional intelligence, narcissism, humility, reflective capacity, and overconfidence). Interestingly, the empirical results show that the correlation between CEO demographic characteristics and a company's environmental performance or disclosure practices is of greatest interest.

However, there are only a limited number of studies, 18 to be exact, that look at the psychological characteristics of CEOs, suggesting that this is an area that needs to be further researched and understood. The research into the psychological traits of CEOs found that narcissism, hubris, and overconfidence were each examined in three separate studies, while traits such as aggressiveness, extraversion, emotional intelligence, humility, and reflective capacity were only examined in one study each. Further research on how psychological traits of CEOs influence environmental performance is essential for a comprehensive understanding in this area (Mahran and Elamer, 2023). Furthermore, the review does not present studies that consider leadership styles and other constructs typical of WOP, and the lack of focus on governance is evident.

When examining the leadership characteristics typical of WOP that are suitable for supporting GfS, an interesting result emerges in relation to governance of common pool resources and voluntary leadership, that is «the actions of individuals who voluntarily take the initiative to speak up and propose a course of action for the group» (Andersson et al., 2020, p. 27293). This type of unselfish leadership has proven to be effective in promoting GfS for sustainable resource management. In particular, unselfish leadership can: improve group consensus on rules; change group dynamics through enhanced information exchange, reciprocal collaboration, and trust within the group; and exert greater influence under conditions of increased biophysical and social uncertainties. This type of leadership has been particularly important for the creation and institutionalization of rules and governance in relation to sustainability (Andersson et al., 2020).

The proactive and empowering nature of voluntary leadership corresponds at the organizational level to the dynamics that often prevail in employee-owned organizations. Yetim and Gur (2023) use the instrument of interviewing leaders from such organizations to explore the development of environmentally conscious decision-making. The results show that

transparency and delegated authority are key mechanisms driving environmentally conscious decision-making processes in employee-owned organizations. Thus, the first salient features that emerge from the overlap between leadership and GfS are voluntariness, unselfishness, delegation, and transparency. These elements emerged in studies dealing with non-hierarchical contexts.

Thinking about more focused leadership by the top management of an organization, meaning by the CEO, and its impact on governance, there is an interesting and counterintuitive finding regarding narcissism. In the study by Lin and colleagues (2020), a positive relationship was found between green marketing programs and narcissistic traits of the CEO. The premise was that sustainable action can be elicited by CEOs' need to enhance their image and gain attention (Petrenko et al., 2016). The empirical results showed that CEO narcissism has a significant positive impact on the implementation of the green marketing programs, with the mediation of the environmental strategy. These results are an important point of reference for decision makers involved in the implementation and governance of green marketing. While considering the negative implications of narcissism, it is important to consider that this characteristic of CEOs can encourage reflection and integration of sustainability issues. For this reason, it is important to build a governance system that guides these types of CEOs (Lin et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Lungeanu and Weber (2021) have shown that when we think about how to make companies more sustainable, we need to consider how leaders make decisions and where they put their efforts to maximize their positive impact on the world. In fact, leaders are critical to where a company puts its money, particularly on social and environmental projects. They looked at how CEOs engage in corporate social responsibility and how they donate to charity. They found that CEOs can switch their focus between these two areas to adjust their efforts to have the greatest positive impact on society and the environment (Lungeanu and Weber, 2021), resulting in balanced social and environmental sustainability.

Finally, when involved in sustainability decision-making, leaders must consider whether their organization is self-determined to implement sustainable actions (intrinsic motivation) or driven by circumstances (extrinsic motivation). Such differences in self-determination depend on the underlying psychological needs of organizations for competence, autonomy, and relatedness and are evident in leadership decisions about sustainability initiatives (Shah and Arjoon, 2015).

Thus, when thinking about leaders in organizations, it is necessary to consider both their characteristics and personal inclinations (such as narcissism, which can nevertheless be conducive to sustainability), their

orientation in decision-making (which should balance the needs of the organization with different types of sustainability, depending on the circumstances of the context), and the psychological characteristics of the organization itself (e.g., intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, the needs on which it depends, and the type of governance in which it results).

GfS without leadership is therefore not enough. In our opinion, leadership makes it possible to grasp certain human and relational factors that relate to the meso level, which connect individual perception with macro-dynamics and ultimately characterize sustainability.

3.1.3. GfS Leadership's interplay with values and culture

The first and most important relationship of GfS-oriented leadership that we examine because of its prominent role in WOP is with the values and culture of the organization (Schein, 1992). Values and culture are intertwined in several famous organizational theories (Schein, 1992; Trice and Beyer, 1984), one being a subset of the other. According to Schein (1992), values represent an intermediate level of organizational culture, while Trice and Beyer (1984) refer to them as judgments of preferability with deontological valence, capable of distinguishing the right from the wrong. In the context of leadership, values therefore prove to be an important organizational element for GfS, both in the individual and collective sense of the organization.

First, some organizational studies have highlighted the influence of the values of CEOs and directors, who are considered leaders, on environmental sustainability (Prömpeler et al., 2023). The value systems fundamental to their impact on sustainability are biospheric values, which incentivize pro-environmental beliefs and actions, and egoistic values, which constrain them (Steg and Bolderdijk, et al., 2014). However, the consequences of the presence of such values can be more complex, as in the findings collected by Prömpeler et al. (2023), who examined the relationship between the values of the leaders and sustainability: counterintuitively, when the CEO was selfish, directors focused even more on sustainability, likely because directors play a critical role in monitoring the CEO's decisions from a governance perspective and therefore, when directors care about the environment, they counteract the CEO's selfishness by prioritizing sustainability more.

Shifting the focus on the collective dimension of values, we come across the issue of organizational culture and its relationship to GfS leadership. Culture is defined as «a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation or internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be

taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to problems» (Schein, 1992, p. 12). To promote sustainability, it is important to understand the values that shape an organization's culture and to identify which of these values can be aligned with sustainability (Marques et al., 2021). Adebayo and colleagues (2020) point to the central role that organizational culture and values play in aligning with sustainable development: the dominant values, as reflected in culture, influence individuals' behaviors and actions, contributing to more sustainable organizational performance. In particular, sustainable organizations need to develop an organizational culture that is sensitive to social and environmental concerns (Leon, 2013), which can manifest itself, among other things, in the support of top management – leaders – for sustainability (Lo et al., 2012). Bergman and colleagues (2017), in a review of conceptualizations of corporate sustainability, describe one that refers to corporate sustainability as an ethical approach that is primarily concerned with the morality of corporate behavior, which should therefore prioritize values over profits. This view encompasses the concepts of leadership and corporate culture, as the values of individual decision-makers are reflected in the culture of their organization and determine its focus on sustainability.

The cultural change required for the implementation of GfS is therefore closely linked to the elements of leadership, values, and organizational culture (Sacchi et al., 2023), which in turn are interrelated and interdependent (Schein, 1992).

In summary, values (both personal and shared) and organizational culture are not only important for GfS, but are also related to a broader leadership orientation. Therefore, to effectively support GfS, leadership must favor a style that promotes the establishment of a culture of sustainability and pro-environmental values. The characteristics of this type of leadership and their interrelationships can and should be explored further.

3.1.4. GfS Leadership's interplay with complexity and change

The idea of sustainability implicitly and explicitly presupposes change: the change in environmental, social, and economic conditions requires a change in human systems in order to adapt. The future of humanity depends on the ability of people to make a radical and systemic change that encompasses profound values and beliefs, social behavior patterns, and the way different levels of reality are governed and managed (Westley et al., 2011).

The need for change also extends to the organizational (meso) level, where the key role of governance emerges, namely the attempt to develop a

comprehensive approach that addresses the need to change thinking, tools, and methods in order to effectively manage change and implement new sustainable lifestyles (van Zeijl-Rozema et al., 2008). Change is thus both a cause and a consequence of sustainability and is framed as organizational and not just technical change at the macro level of international relations, the meso level of organizations and the micro level of individuals: in fact, if innovation only concerned the technical and technological sphere, humanity would risk increasing environmental risks, which is why such change must be accompanied by a change in thinking, decision-making, and culture (Westley et al., 2011).

The concepts of transformation and change have permeated research into approaches that are useful for the implementation of sustainability. An expression of this orientation is the proliferation of studies on sustainable transitions (Koehler et al., 2019) and transition management, which considers change in a participatory, adaptive, iterative, and forward-looking manner, proposing long-term strategies, optimizing contextual initiatives, and anticipating and adapting to tensions between change and conservation (Kemp et al., 2005; Kemp and Martens, 2007). Transition management is considered to be a suitable approach for the implementation of GfS (Loorbach, 2010; Kemp et al., 2005; Sacchi et al., 2023).

Organizational change is an important object of study in WOP, which views it as the «movement of an organization away from its present state and toward some desired future state to increase its effectiveness» (George, Jones, 2012, p. 533). In classic WOP theories, change is also associated with leadership and other organizational elements such as organizational culture and interpersonal relationships (Schein, 1992; Lewin, 1951). To achieve organizational change that leads to sustainability, an important aspect is leadership commitment (Eccles et al., 2012; Maimbo and Zadek, 2017), which together with governance can have a significant impact on organizational transformations (Doppelt, 2017). The study by Sancak (2023) has identified different phases of sustainable transformations characterized by environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors, of which governance has the greatest influence. Leadership plays an important role in each of the described steps towards sustainable transformation.

Organizational change is therefore a figure of departure into sustainability. This change is in turn influenced and influences GfS and can be managed effectively through good leadership. However, change is only one element of the complexity that leaders must take into account when promoting GfS. Sustainability and sustainable transition are indeed a complex matter, and this is also true for research and study on sustainability (Ahuerma et al., 2018; van Kerkhoff, 2014; Peter and Swilling, 2014).

Edgar Morin (1993), a renowned philosopher and sociologist, describes complexity as the paradigm for the interpretation of today's world, from biological life to social phenomena, which «certainly cannot obey principles of intelligibility less complex than those now required for natural phenomena» (Morin, 1993, p. 11). With a WOP lens, to navigate complex systems, where complexity amplifies deviations and makes it impossible to reconstruct causal chains (Weick, 1969), it becomes essential the ability to dwell in uncertainty and lack of meaning, what Lanzara (2016) calls “negative capability”.

Kirschke and Newig (2017) have addressed the complexity of sustainability issues by drawing on research in psychology and using the instrument of governance, which must prove flexible, incorporate different elements and move along a continuum of ‘density’, meaning the degree of rigidity of rules and information exchange. Within this framework, GfS leadership is therefore responsible for governing and navigating through complexity. In order to make effective environmental management decisions in a complex landscape such as sustainability, the multiplicity of decision makers involved must be taken into account and the different disciplines integrated to achieve coherence between the different levels of decision-making for the management of environmental issues (Martinez de Anguita et al., 2008).

Indeed, in systems characterized by complexity, traditional top-down leadership models may be less effective and leaders of complex systems need to focus on collaboration, learning and innovation of all actors in the system (McKim and Goodwin, 2021). According to McKim and Goodwin (2021), this type of complexity-oriented leadership is able to promote change and sustainable practices.

In complex situations characterized by «uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and values conflicting» (Schon, 1983, p. 23), the usefulness of another leadership trait becomes apparent: reflexivity. The “Reflective Practitioner”, theorized by Donald Schön (1983), is a professional who reflects during action or after action (reflection-in-action or reflection-on-action) on his actions and their consequences, attributing value to the process and work practices and being capable, in this way, of truly learning from their mistakes. Among the WOP themes related to leadership that prove to be useful for the promotion of GfS, reflexivity proves to be suitable to support the analysis of complexity necessary for sustainable development.

Reflexivity is also seen as a central feature of governance that is geared towards the management of sustainable development and related issues. In the view of Voß and colleagues (2006), reflexive governance has the capacity to create interactions between different rationalities, to take into account the complexity of linkages between sustainability spheres, to address the

uncertainty associated with systemic dynamics, and the ambiguity of sustainability criteria. Reflexive governance models are characterized by continuous and situated learning in the course of action, rather than complete knowledge or control maximization. The authors describe reflexive strategy as «the phenomenon whereby thinking and acting regarding an object of governance also influences the subject and its governance capacity» (Voß et al., 2006).

Kemp and Martens (2007) affirm that sustainable development requires the renewal of institutional governance and that such change should be carried out using reflexive methods that anticipate problems and allow for adequate analysis of progress-oriented actions. The authors argue that governance models need to be made more reflexive to ensure that the policies implemented are truly sustainable.

In summary, complexity and change in addressing sustainability issues are key elements that need to be considered when implementing an effective GfS. Leadership that is able to promote GfS must therefore be able to deal with uncertainty and a multitude of variables in a reflexive, flexible and adaptive manner.

3.1.5 GfS Leadership's interplay with inclusion

Inclusion is a central theme in most of the SDGs, but especially in Goal 8: 'Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all', which refers to inclusion in the workplace (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace are increasingly becoming the is emerging as a significant focus in both research and organizational approaches, as studies such as those by Adamson et al. (2021) show. Inclusion can also be a goal of leaders in the workplace, who can make it a priority and act as inclusive leaders. Inclusive leadership is «leadership that stimulates the exchange, discussion and utilization of employees' diverse features, as well as supporting the full participation of all employees in order to satisfy needs of individuation and belongingness» (Ashikali, 2019, p.8).

Inclusive leadership can have an impact on sustainability in a broader sense within organizations, as some studies show. Bhutto et al. (2020) see inclusive leadership as an important driver for sustainability in organizations. Their study examines the relationship between green inclusive leadership and green creativity. They found that green inclusive leadership has a positive impact on green psychological climate, green work engagement, and ultimately green creativity in both the manufacturing and service sectors. Therefore, the adoption of inclusive leadership practices can promote sustainability in

organizations, especially in the tourism and hospitality industry. Elmagrhi et al. (2018) investigated the impact of governance structures on environmental performance, focusing in particular on the influence of gender diversity on the corporate board on environmental aspects improvement. Their study shows that the proportion and age of female board members have a positive impact on the overall environmental performance of companies as well as on environmental strategy, implementation, and disclosure. These findings underscore the importance of inclusive leadership, such as gender-diverse boards, for the advancement of GfS in organizations.

However, the topic of work inclusion is reminiscent of the field of social sustainability and, in particular, the sustainability of organizational life, a relevant area to WOP (Di Fabio, 2017, Molino, et al., 2019). Inclusive leadership can indeed promote career sustainability, which is characterized by individual agency, which gives meaning to the person, through the mediation of supervisor developmental feedback and thriving at work (Fang et al., 2021). According to Feng and colleagues (2021), leaders must achieve corporate sustainability by supporting employees in improving their career sustainability and recognizing individual sustainable development as a fundamental source of sustainability in both society and enterprises. Furthermore, inclusive leadership is also positively related to sustainable employability, that denotes the degree to which an individual has the ability, motivation, and opportunities to engage in work both currently and in the future (Gürbüz et al., 2022). Inclusive leadership and high-involvement HR practices are associated with sustainable employability. Furthermore, inclusive leadership and high-involvement human resource practices exhibit an indirect association with sustainable employability, mediated by the utilization of strengths at work, which are defined as inherent qualities enabling outstanding performance or optimal functioning (Gürbüz et al., 2022).

Finally, inclusive leadership is positively related to perceived insider status and negatively related to employee withdrawal, thereby enhancing sustainability in employee relationships (Shah et al., 2022).

Thus, inclusive leadership and inclusion in general can promote organizational sustainability and sustainability of organizational life, and therefore leaders who wish to implement a GfS must be mindful of promoting inclusion in their organization.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Implication for practice

Some practical conclusions can be drawn from the above issues to focus

the attention of organizations not only on governance, but also on culture and leadership in order to strengthen their commitment to sustainable governance and improve the effectiveness of their actions.

First of all, as we have argued in this paper, leadership plays a critical role in governance for sustainability; therefore, great efforts in leadership development are needed. Organizations should invest in programs that specifically focus on fostering leadership skills that are aligned with sustainable governance and aim to integrate environmental, social and governance considerations into decision-making processes. Particular attention should be paid to the development of leadership styles in organizations, such as unselfish leadership, which are able to disseminate values and norms to create a culture of sustainability, responsibility and accountability. At the same time, it is important that organizations recognize the presence of destructive leadership, its antecedents and consequences, through a specific corporate analysis (Ghislieri, in press). As for the behavior of leaders, the consequences of their actions should be considered at all levels, from the environmental impact of the organizations they work for to the well-being of the people they work with (Piao et al., 2022).

Secondly, training programs should also be developed for employees to improve their understanding of sustainability, governance practices and their environmental, economic, and social impacts. In addition, sustainability could be incorporated into performance evaluations to incentivize employees and teams to engage in sustainable practices (Eccles and Serafeim, 2011). To foster the development of a sustainability culture, transparent communication both internally and externally is also necessary to build trust and encourage a shared commitment to sustainable goals among employees and stakeholders. As Taljaard and de Beer (2019) emphasize, communication plays an important role in GfS, as dialogical interaction between stakeholders in decision-making can lead to better environmental outcomes (Newig et al., 2018). Leaders promoting GfS should address communication models, while promoting sensemaking activities that allow the complexity of events to be given order, albeit partial and fragmented, and reduce the ambiguity created by the multiplicity of conflicting information in complex systems. Sensemaking helps to develop a shared ideology that can be seen as an alternative source of organizational structure (Weick, 1995). Communication and sensemaking can also be considered means of conflict resolution and negotiation and are also a fundamental part of group functioning.

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, certifications cannot be the primary goal. However, the introduction of standardized ESG

reports facilitates comparability and transparency and increases the credibility of sustainability initiatives.

4.2 Implication for research

Implications must also be described from a research perspective in order to contribute with valuable insights to the evolving field of WOP in the context of sustainability. To this end, it is necessary to build a new body of knowledge on this topic and raise awareness of the role of WOP practitioners and researchers within the scope of governance for sustainability. Indeed, there are already some contributions in the literature on how to promote sustainability in organizations, but awareness of the potential role of WOP is still lacking. Therefore, more evidence-based contributions are needed to empirically demonstrate the validity of the main dimensions of WOP in promoting sustainability at all levels. Longitudinal studies could be useful to assess the impact of governance practices for sustainability on the environment, society, organizational performance, and people's well-being over time. Case studies may be the best suited to observe the effects of sustainable actions or certain leadership approaches in specific organizational contexts. Cross-cultural studies can also be valuable, especially when examining cultural differences in perceptions and practices related to sustainable governance and gaining insights into the effectiveness of different governance approaches (Doh, and Guay, 2006). Studies should also involve employees to understand how they perceive and respond to sustainability practices (Aguinis and Glavas, 2019) and what is most effective in promoting their engagement and commitment to sustainability goals.

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