

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainability leadership: An integrative review and conceptual synthesis

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, scholars have extensively investigated the topic of leadership, contributing to the development of diverse leadership theories and contemporary managerial practice. However, the emergence and renewed focus on societal grand challenges warrant an alternative approach to leadership such as sustainability leadership. Despite the critical importance of sustainability leadership in addressing these global concerns, scholarly research in this field of inquiry, by and large, remained scant and fragmented, lacking conceptual coherence and theoretical integration. While the existing literature provides insights into sustainability leadership characteristics, competencies, behaviors, and actions, it failed to integrate a holistic understanding of how these aspects are connected and affect each other. Accordingly, the purpose of this review paper is to provide conceptual synthesis and critical appraisal of the extant literature on sustainability leadership. Drawing on a systems theory perspective on paradox, we developed an integrative multilevel sustainability leadership framework, which demonstrates the linkages between individual-level mechanisms (micro), organizational-level mechanisms (meso), and societal context (macro). The framework explicates the key underlying mechanisms of sustainability leadership functioning embedded in paradoxical tensions to address complex and multifaceted sustainability issues. The paper concludes by offering implications for research and managerial practice and avenues for future research.

KEYWORDS

leadership, sustainability, sustainability leadership, systems theory perspective on paradox

1 | INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a complex, interpersonal, and socially contracted concept that has a critical role in addressing global sustainability issues (Hernandez, 2008; Parkin, 2010; Schad & Smith, 2019). Sustainability has become a business imperative (Sajjad et al., 2015), and today, corporate leadership is increasingly expected to play a proactive role in

tackling societal grand challenges, which continue to have an impact on individuals, organizations, communities, and nations (George et al., 2016; Van der Byl et al., 2020; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). George et al. (2016) defined a “grand challenge” as a “specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation” (p. 1881). Grand challenges such as poverty, hunger, social inequality, economic instability, and climate change are not only complex, ambiguous, multifaceted, and interconnected issues with significant global significance but also remain “stubbornly persistent despite technological,

Abbreviations: 3Ps, People, Planet, Profit; DJSI, Dow Jones Sustainability Index; JCR, Journal Citation Reports; VUCA, volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

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economic, and social progress” (George et al., 2016, p. 1880). Reflecting on the role and importance of business leadership in addressing societal grand challenges, it can be argued that “sustainability has become an inextricable aspect of leadership” (Burns et al., 2015, p. 89). However, the complex, intractable, and multifarious nature of these challenges implies that the manifestation of tensions creates critical impediments and conflicts (Schad & Smith, 2019; Van der Byl et al., 2020). Contemporary business leadership needs to understand and be proactive in responding to these paradoxical tensions while addressing societal grand challenges.

Incorporating sustainability issues in corporate strategy and addressing paradoxical tensions emerging from pursuing divergent yet interconnected concerns, that is, economic, social, and environmental goals (Hahn et al., 2018; Schad et al., 2016) have become increasingly challenging and frustrating endeavors for corporate leaders in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) business environments (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Levey & Levey, 2019; Sharma, 2019; Smith, 2014). To this end, it can be argued that societal grand challenges are unique, requiring a different form of leadership that can address competing demands simultaneously. Similarly, De Haan et al. (2015) posited that “there is an urgent need in business today for a new type of leadership—one that makes the long-term sustainability of our world a top priority” (p. 1). The leader must be able to anticipate the effects of each of their actions on the ecosystem, social well-being, economic stability, and growth potential. Thus, the notion of sustainability leadership provides a novel pathway to understanding how leaders make effective strategic decisions within the context of complexity (Tuazon et al., 2021) arising from addressing “multiple demands from multiple enlightened stakeholders” (Peterlin et al., 2015, p. 274) and in a persistent state of change (Sharma, 2019).

The concept of leadership is extensively investigated in the extant business and management literature. The emerging leadership conceptualizations and paradigms transcend individual characteristics or differences, theorizing leadership as dyadic, paradox-savvy, shared, collaborative, relational, strategic, global, and a complex social dynamic (e.g., Avolio et al., 2009; Bendell & Little, 2015; Kurucz et al., 2017; Raelin, 2016; Škerlavaj, 2022; Waldman & Bowen, 2016). In addition, prior leadership literature focused on diverse sustainability-related topics (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018), such as ethical leadership, servant leadership, value-based leadership, and responsible leadership (e.g., Brandt, 2016). However, relative to other similar forms of leadership, sustainability leadership explicitly recognizes that a leader needs to make sense of and engage with multilevel paradoxical tensions and address divergent social, economic, and environmental goals simultaneously. Further, we argue that sustainability leadership is intrinsically a multi-level construct, and it is plausibly unique in the sense that it renders a more holistic conceptualization of leadership functioning compared to other similar forms of leadership in terms of tackling societal grand challenges. Yet, despite its potential significance, the sustainability leadership phenomenon has received limited scholarly attention, which is fragmented (Armani et al., 2020). Accordingly, there exist several gaps in the sustainability leadership literature.

First, the sustainability leadership literature is in its infancy and lacks theoretical maturity as the subject matter is still evolving (Peterlin

et al., 2015; Sharma, 2019). Brandt (2016) suggested that “despite a considerable body of research on leadership in business, there is limited work to date on understanding the relationship between leadership and corporate sustainability” (p. 190). Thus, it is imperative to integrate the scholarly work conducted to examine sustainability leadership and develop new insights that advance the existing knowledge of the field. Second, with a few exceptions (e.g., Tuazon et al., 2021), leadership processes at the individual level (micro) (e.g., perceptions, emotions, competencies, and cognition), organizational level (meso) (e.g., organization and network-related processes), and societal level (macro) (e.g., the social-relational context) are investigated in a standalone manner. These processes are mostly studied independently, suggesting a holistic understanding of how leadership is conceived and practiced at multiple levels in an integrated way is currently lacking (Gardner et al., 2020; Van der Byl et al., 2020; Van Knippenberg & Dwertmann, 2022). In particular, there remains a paucity of research examining a holistic perspective on the topic of sustainability leadership (Gerard et al., 2017) and how it is conceived and practiced in an organization in pursuit of addressing complex and competing sustainability issues (Hahn et al., 2015). Accordingly, from a sustainability leadership theory-building perspective, it is not only important to individually examine micro-, meso-, and macro-level leadership processes but also how the theoretical construct of sustainability leadership is conceived and practiced across multiple levels and multifarious contexts (Van der Byl et al., 2020). Further, it is crucial to understand the interactive and dynamic linkages and mechanisms that connect multilevel leadership elements and processes (i.e., individual, organizational, and systems) to achieve sustainability outcomes for both the current and future stakeholders (Van Knippenberg & Dwertmann, 2022).

Third, the existing research mostly ignored the importance of theoretical lenses to analyze and develop the sustainability leadership concept. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to review, evaluate, and synthesize emergent sustainability leadership literature and develop a coherent integrative sustainability leadership framework. In particular, we aim to critically examine the underlying individual and organizational sustainability leadership mechanisms—and their potential linkages—that influence sustainable outcomes. Hence, the research question is: What are the underlying individual and organizational-level mechanisms of the sustainability leadership phenomenon?

To address this question, we have adopted an integrative review methodology to identify and critically examine sustainability leadership literature. Drawing on the “systems theory perspective on paradox” (Schad & Bansal, 2018), we have developed an integrative sustainability leadership framework that demonstrates dynamic and complex multilevel processes and linkages explaining the dynamics of sustainability leadership functioning. The systems theory perspective on paradox incorporates insights from both the paradox perspective and complex systems theory. The paradox perspective explicates the presence of “tensions between different desirable, yet interdependent and conflicting sustainability objectives” (Hahn et al., 2018, p. 235). The ability to effectively manage paradoxical tension is a key expertise for business leadership (Franken et al., 2020). While in the past scholars have considered a trade-off (either/or logic) approach to navigate such tensions, the paradox theory argues in support of an integrative view (both/and logic)

(Lewis, 2000; Schad & Bansal, 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Evidence suggests that leadership and organizations holding an integrative view of sustainability (i.e., embracing sustainability tensions between social, economic, and environmental goals) foster high-performing organizations (Joseph et al., 2019; Sajjad et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2020). Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015) further argued that “paradox theory holds promise for finding creative solutions to some of our most vexing sustainability challenges” (p. 73).

Additionally, organizations are viewed as complex living systems (Allen, 2018; Ferdig, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Complex systems are open systems with numerous elements that continually interact in a dynamic and nonlinear fashion, and these systems operate under conditions far from equilibrium. Complex systems involve negative and positive feedback loops that often drive paradoxical states (Cilliers, 2002; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015), nested across various levels. Accordingly, we have adopted a systems theory perspective on paradox to examine the sustainability leadership phenomenon to develop rich insights into the paradoxical nature of leadership functioning in the context of multi-level systems.

Our framework suggests that sustainability leadership continually encounters cognitive conflicts and paradoxical tensions while such leaders engage in addressing societal grand challenges within their organizations. The framework further explicates how a sustainability-oriented leader determines the contextual conditions in the external and internal business environment and continually aligns and adapts micro- and meso-level processes to address divergent and interconnected concerns for economic prosperity, social welfare, and environmental protection within and across multilevel systems. The framework proposed in this article contributes to leadership research by identifying several pathways and research opportunities to extend sustainability leadership theory and wider streams of cross-disciplinary research that integrate sustainability and leadership concepts.

2 | REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this review paper is to present a state-of-the-art literature review on sustainability leadership and develop an integrative sustainability leadership framework by synthesizing and critically analyzing emerging sustainability leadership literature. To this end, the paper utilizes an integrative review methodology to illustrate the diverse, multilevel, and interconnected sustainability leadership mechanisms (Whittemore & Knafel, 2005). An integrative review allows an in-depth critical exploration of the subject matter and synthesis of diverse interrelated concepts through reviewing, comparing, synthesizing, and evaluating new relationships in distinct streams of literature (Torraco, 2005) and developing the novel perspectives and frameworks (Snyder, 2019) imperative for advancing theoretical augmentation and improving managerial practice. According to Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020), “integrative literature reviews are strongly anchored in a representative description of a field, but add new insights via a critical analysis and synthesis of the field's literature” (p. 1277). The current review investigates sustainability leadership, which is a relatively new, emerging research phenomenon.

Accordingly, the integrative review approach is an appropriate methodological choice (Torraco, 2005) when the purpose of the research inquiry is to examine emerging phenomena and new topics through synthesis and analysis of the existing body of knowledge.

Following the integrative review guidelines proposed by Snyder (2019), we conducted our review in three phases. First, to sharpen the research focus and organize the literature, we draw on the research question as the central guiding device. Taking this into account, a search of relevant literature was conducted in 2021 and 2022 using electronic databases—Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. We considered peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly books published in the English language. The search terms used to identify and include articles and other published materials were “sustainability leadership,” “sustainable leadership,” and “sustainability in leadership.” A total of 235 records were found in the initial search by employing the search terms. While we broadly focused our literature search on the business and management research domain, we included some relevant articles from social science and environmental management disciplines, which considered the business-related implications of the sustainability leadership concept.

Second, we carefully reviewed the abstracts of all the publications identified through electronic databases in the staged review phase. The purpose was to determine the relevance of each publication for further review and evaluation. Our analysis revealed that some initial work on sustainability leadership appeared in the early 2000s; however, most studies were published after 2010. A total of 74 publications were selected for qualitative analysis after removing duplicates and out-of-scope studies. These publications include journal articles ($n = 63$), book chapters ($n = 7$), and books ($n = 4$). In terms of research methods, the authors employed a quantitative research design ($n = 26$) followed by a conceptual/review methodology ($n = 22$) to investigate the sustainability leadership concept. A few articles also utilized mixed methods research design ($n = 8$), and the least employed method was the qualitative research approach ($n = 6$). A list of the main contributing journals is provided in Table 1.

Third, the selected publications were synthesized and critically examined, and based on this analysis, we identified key underlying issues that determine sustainability leadership functioning. Hence, the mechanisms selected and presented in the sustainability leadership framework are based on careful analysis and synthesis of the literature. This process involves strong conceptual thinking and theoretical assimilation by which we developed our integrative sustainability leadership framework capturing and demonstrating key themes (i.e., individual- and organizational-level mechanisms) and how these themes are interlinked.

3 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 | Sustainability leadership and related approaches

The concept of sustainability leadership is conceptualized in various ways within the literature incorporating sustainability and leadership

TABLE 1 A list of the top 10 contributing journals.

No.	Journal	Publisher	Number of articles published	JCR Impact Factor 2021	Scopus CiteScore 2021
1	<i>Sustainability</i>	MDPI	8	3.39	5
2	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	Springer	5	6.3	10.8
3	<i>Journal of Cleaner Production</i>	Elsevier	3	11.1	15.8
4	<i>Leadership & Organization Development Journal</i>	Emerald	3	3.9	4.9
5	<i>Journal of Leadership Studies</i>	Wiley	3	Not available	Not available
6	<i>Strategy and Leadership</i>	Emerald	2	Not available	1.5
7	<i>Journal of Corporate Citizenship</i>	Greenleaf	2	Not available	Not available
8	<i>Business Strategy and Development</i>	Wiley	2	Not available	3.4
9	<i>Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration</i>	Emerald	2	Not available	3.3
10	<i>Global Business and Organizational Excellence</i>	Wiley	2	Not available	1.5

concepts. Accordingly, to understand the theoretical development of sustainability leadership, we first explain how sustainability leadership concept is distinguished from other similar leadership approaches. Next, we present a brief overview of sustainability leadership conceptualizations proposed in the current body of knowledge.

The sustainability leadership concept is distinct from other similar leadership theories such as ethical leadership, value-based leadership, servant leadership, and responsible leadership; however, there exist some partial overlaps between sustainability leadership and other corresponding leadership approaches. Ethical leadership is based on the premise that a leader needs to demonstrate “normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Correspondingly, value-based leadership builds on the ethical and moral foundations describing the appropriate behavior of a leader to achieve organizational goals (Copeland, 2014; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Similar to ethical and value-based leadership approaches, sustainability leadership also acknowledges the importance of being ethical in one's intents, interactions, and behaviors. As Bendell and Little (2015) suggest, “sustainability leadership is any ethical behavior that has the intention and effect of helping groups of people achieve environmental or social outcomes that we assess as significant and that they would not have otherwise achieved” (p. 16). However, at the same time, sustainability leadership is much broader in scope than exclusively comprehending ethical and moral aspects of leadership functioning. Sustainability leadership is essentially a more inclusive multilevel phenomenon that considers the paradoxical nature of leadership in holistically addressing multitier sustainability issues. For instance, societal grand challenges including climate change and social inequality are inherently complex, interrelated, and novel issues, and addressing them requires a form of leadership able to effectively deal with such issues holistically.

Servant leadership holds that a leader needs to prioritize the needs of others including an organization and the larger community before personal needs (Eva, 2019; Reinke, 2004). Relative to sustainability leadership that embraces an integrative (both/and logic) stance

in responding to often divergent sustainability goals, servant leadership supports a trade-off (either/or logic) approach to navigate tensions originating from exercising leadership responsibilities. Schad and Smith (2019) argue that “the grand challenges facing our world call for more complex leadership that can address competing demands simultaneously” (p. 58). Building on Schad and Smith's (2019) standpoint, it can be argued that leadership approaches that draw on a trade-off (either/or logic) perspective could potentially offer little guidance to understanding and explaining the dynamics and complexity involved in addressing societal grand challenges. Additionally, responsible leadership utilizes a stakeholder theory lens to explicate organizational leadership functioning related to establishing and sustaining trusting and beneficial relationships with diverse corporate stakeholders, nurturing social capital, and addressing corporate social responsibility concerns (Maak & Pless, 2006). Similar to responsible leadership, sustainability leadership also acknowledges that corporations are an integral part of the natural world and larger society, and leaders representing these corporations have a fundamental responsibility to create shared value for all stakeholders (Fernandez et al., 2020; McCann & Sweet, 2014; Peterlin et al., 2015). Ferdig (2007) argued that “sustainability leadership reflects an emerging consciousness among people who are choosing to live their lives and lead their organizations in ways that account for their impact on the earth, society, and the health of local and global economies” (p. 26). Conversely, in comparison to responsible leadership, which specifically focuses on developing trusting stakeholder relationships and responding to social responsibility issues, sustainability leadership aims at maintaining a suitable balance among divergent social, economic, and environmental goals and creating value for both current and future generations (De Haan et al., 2015; McCann & Sweet, 2014).

3.2 | Conceptualizing sustainability leadership

Ferdig (2007) conceives sustainability leadership as a holistic approach to co-creating a sustainable future that “balances among and between simultaneous and sometimes contradictory demands for economically,

socially, and environmentally sustainable solutions” (p. 25). This definition implies the role of sustainability leadership in achieving a sustainable future through working collaboratively, as well as understanding and balancing sustainability tensions embedded in complex interconnected systems. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011a) also acknowledge the significance of achieving sustainable futures and the inherent complexities embedded in realizing an ideal sustainability state. The authors define sustainability leadership as “achieving futures in which humans live within their ecological and social means without exploiting other parties” (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a, p. 30). The primary goal of sustainability leadership “is to keep people, profits, and the planet in balance over the life of the firm, and in so doing ensure that the business generates the social capital needed to weather downturns” (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011b, p. 6). Accordingly, sustainability leadership envisages that a business leader has both (i) an important role in creating value for all organizational shareholders (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a) through maintaining a balance between short-term and long-term goals (De Haan et al., 2015; Fernandez et al., 2020; McCann & Sweet, 2014) and (ii) responsibility for promoting sustainable business practices that create a positive impact on society and the environment, including future generations (De Haan et al., 2015).

According to Rainey (2013), sustainability leadership “involves a rich mosaic of principles, philosophies, perspectives, styles, mindsets, experiences, methods, and constructs” (p. xix). Peterlin et al. (2015) posited that sustainability leadership “takes into consideration a wide range of complex interrelations among individuals, the business community, global markets, and the ecosystem, with the key aim that an organization achieves welfare by respecting social values, achieving long-term success by value-based strategic decision-making and protecting the natural environment, of which we all form an integral part” (p. 280). In this sense, sustainability leadership represents an inclusive approach that requires leadership to embrace ethical values, systems thinking, cognitive diversity, reflective practice and reflexivity, and resilience (Burns et al., 2015; De Haan et al., 2015; Fernandez et al., 2020; Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Parkin, 2010; Raelin, 2016) to realize divergent yet desirable sustainability goals. Additionally, sustainability leadership seeks to develop more inclusive, collaborative, and reflective processes within organizations (Burns et al., 2015; Kurucz et al., 2017; Parkin, 2010; Raelin, 2016) by which value-driven and mindful individuals (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Rooney et al., 2021) strive to address societal grand challenges through collective wisdom (Raelin, 2016) and paradox-savvy approaches (Waldman & Bowen, 2016).

The above discussion highlights the existing conceptualizations of sustainability leadership and the diverse aspects underpinning the concept. However, for the purpose of this article, we describe sustainability leadership as a dynamic and complex process in which sustainability-oriented leaders engage in intricate psycho-cognitive and socio-cognitive (relational) processes to foster sustainable outcomes for business and society both in the short and long run. In doing so, leaders incessantly strive to explore and implement novel resolution strategies to manage sustainability tensions arising from

achieving economic, social, and environmental goals simultaneously, as well as to resolving societal grand challenges.

From an empirical standpoint, studies revealed that sustainability leadership is associated with corporate financial performance (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016), organizational learning (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021), stakeholder satisfaction (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2014a), employee satisfaction (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2014b), and employee innovation behavior (Javed et al., 2021; Škerlavaj, 2022). Additionally, Iqbal et al. (2021) revealed that sustainability leadership affects environmental performance through environmental innovation. In their study, Kantabutra and Avery (2013) showed that sustainability leadership is associated with improved corporate brand and reputation, customer and staff satisfaction, and financial performance. Suriyankietkaew (2016) investigated the relationship between sustainability leadership and customer satisfaction. The findings demonstrated that sustainability leadership is related to superior customer satisfaction. Further, Iqbal et al. (2020) examined the relationship between sustainable leadership and sustainable performance. Their findings demonstrate that sustainable leadership and sustainable performance are positively related such that psychological safety mediates and psychological empowerment moderates the relationship between sustainable leadership and sustainable performance.

3.3 | Inherent nature of paradoxical tensions

Societal grand challenges encompass complexity and contradictions caused by three important factors—plurality, change, and scarcity. These elements correspond to paradoxical tensions for sustainability leadership as addressing these contradictory yet interdependent demands presents an overwhelming challenge (Schad et al., 2016; Schad & Smith, 2019). A paradox is defined as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Similarly, Schad et al. (2016) described paradoxes as messy phenomena designating “persistent contradiction between interdependent elements” (p. 6). The above conceptualizations of paradox indicate two defining features of the paradox concept—contradictions and interdependence (Schad et al., 2016). Further, Ferdig (2007) argued that conflict, tension, and differing perspectives are natural attributes of healthy systems. Failure to acknowledge the intricacy and underlying tensions within and across multilevel complex and dynamic systems impedes sustainability leadership's ability to fully understand and address paradoxes while attending to societal grand challenges (Schad & Bansal, 2018; Van der Byl et al., 2020).

Accordingly, we have adopted a “systems theory perspective on paradox” lens that provides a greater prospect for enriching sustainability leadership scholarship as contemporary leaders often encounter multiple, complex nested paradoxes simultaneously while addressing societal grand challenges (Schad et al., 2016; Schad & Bansal, 2018; Schad & Smith, 2019; Van der Byl et al., 2020). According to Schad and Bansal (2018), “a systems perspective provides key insights into paradoxes embedded in open systems.”

Thus, drawing on a systems theory perspective on paradox could potentially enable an in-depth understanding of how sustainability leadership deals with paradoxes while addressing interdependent yet competing demands and conflicting goals—economic prosperity, social welfare, and environmental protection within and across multi-level contexts.

Sustainability leadership can effectively address contradictory yet desirable sustainability goals—nested multilevel paradoxes involving personal, organizational, and societal levels by accepting, living with, harmonizing, embracing, and working through such tensions, even in the absence of instant business gains (Hahn et al., 2018; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Van Neerijnen et al., 2021; Waldman et al., 2019). Nonetheless, this does not suggest that sustainability leaders ignore or abandon the economic contributions of the firm altogether, but rather they engage in a constant search for resolution strategies to address paradoxical tensions through “purposeful iterations between alternatives in order to ensure simultaneous attention to them over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 392), which provides greater possibility of generating creative approaches and outcomes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). In this sense, leaders with paradoxical thinking demonstrate cognitive complexity, a broad perspective on seeking solutions to complex and interrelated problems, and “are open to ambiguity and multiple experiences” (Waldman et al., 2019, pp. 1–2). The paradox-embracing approach enables sustainability leadership to explore new opportunities by constantly attending to paradoxical tensions (Škerlavaj, 2022; Waldman et al., 2019), as well as enhancing learning and improving understanding of the complex and dynamic sustainability issues (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001).

4 | INTEGRATIVE SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Building on the extensive review of sustainability and leadership concepts, this section presents an integrative sustainability leadership framework (Figure 1) developed by the authors. Our main premise is that the underlying mechanisms shown in the framework are the conditional elements (stimuli) that provide the foundation for sustainability leadership to effectively function and steer meaningful change toward addressing societal grand challenges. The framework demonstrates key individual and organizational-level sustainability leadership mechanisms and how these mechanisms are linked to fostering sustainability outcomes. However, sustainability leadership functioning, in reality, is rather more chaotic and disorganized than linear and orderly, which involves the inherently complex and dynamic intertwining of individual-, organizational-, and societal-level aspects.

Additionally, the framework explains the manifestation of various paradoxical tensions that surface while addressing contradictory yet interconnected social, economic, and environmental concerns within and across multilevel systems (i.e., micro, meso, and macro levels) in which sustainability leaders operate. To fully understand system-level linkages of sustainability leadership mechanisms and the element of paradoxical tensions that such leaders constantly encounter, we draw on a systems theory perspective on paradox to explicate leadership functioning. We argue that a systems theory perspective on paradox is one of the compelling theoretical lenses to realize the paradoxical nature of sustainability leadership functioning and how these paradoxical sustainability concerns are addressed by sustainability leaders in multilevel, complex, and dynamic contexts.

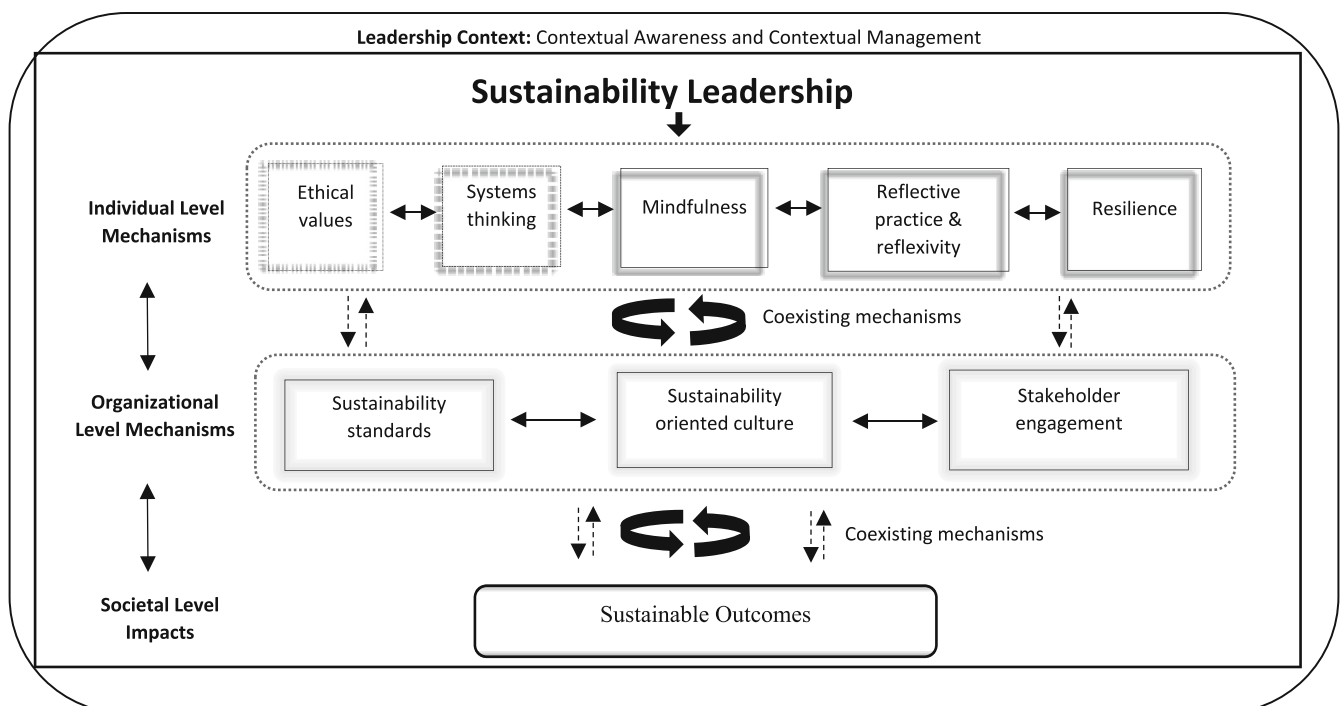


FIGURE 1 Integrative sustainability leadership framework.

4.1 | Sustainability leadership context

The context plays a critical role in the operationalization of the sustainability leadership concept (Gerard et al., 2017; Tideman et al., 2013; Waldman & Bowen, 2016). In our integrative sustainability leadership framework, the context characterizes diverse environmental conditions that influence leadership functioning and sustainability-oriented decisions. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), “one of the biggest challenges facing leaders today is the need to position and enable organizations and people for adaptability in the face of increasingly dynamic and demanding environments” (p. 89). Contextual forces such as societal grand challenges are instrumental in influencing business and steering change in the complicated and dynamic landscapes in which sustainability leadership operates. Hence, sustainability leadership is distinct as it not only puts more emphasis on contextual awareness of persistent disruptions and transformations happening within business and societal contexts (e.g., the manifestation of societal grand challenges and growing stakeholder expectations) but also on prudent management of a complex array of interdependent sustainability issues (e.g., climate change, social and economic inequality, and environmental degradation)—also referred to as contextual management—by which positive impacts on people, communities, and society are accomplished (Tideman et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the context in which sustainability leadership operates can be broadly divided into external (e.g., ecological, social, economic, and political settings) and internal environmental conditions (e.g., culture, strategy, structure, and governance structure) (Visser & Courtice, 2011; Waldman & Bowen, 2016). According to Tideman et al. (2013), “sustainable business transformation rests on the interplay between leadership consciousness and contextual awareness, in both space and time” (p. 30). While the landscape in which many businesses now operate represents a constant state of flux and is increasingly complex (Sharma, 2019; Tideman et al., 2013), many organizations have ignored the role of sustainability leadership in this context (Metcalfe & Benn, 2013). Ferdig (2007) argued that the more complex the environment, the more stakeholders search for a leader who can bring order to the chaos. Organizational success is no longer judged in economic terms (Wiengarten et al., 2017); the social and environmental effects that an organization produces sometimes have an even greater impact on how stakeholders perceive and therefore interact with such organizations (Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Kantabutra & Avery, 2011). In reaction to the various scandals and mistakes from companies, stakeholders have become suspicious of businesses' activities (Soltani, 2014). Stakeholders' needs are so heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting (Barnett et al., 2018) that it requires active management to tackle these demands against the resources the organization can deploy.

4.2 | Individual-level mechanisms

The extant literature connecting sustainability and leadership concepts identified diverse individual-level mechanisms (i.e., aspects

related to human functioning) as illustrated in Table 2. However, building on the analysis of reviewed literature, we focus on the most critical aspects that establish the foundation of the sustainability leadership phenomenon. At the individual level, ethical values, systems thinking, mindfulness, reflective practice/reflectivity, and resilience act as key building blocks (or constituents) that enable sustainability leaders to realize their internal values, aspirations, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors with reference to organizational functioning and societal grand challenges. In other words, individual-level mechanisms serve as a fundamental driving force for sustainability leaders to assess their motives, beliefs, cognitive frames, and aspirations, as well as to envisage their relationships, roles, and responsibilities within an organization and engage with the larger society and the environment concerning addressing societal grand challenges.

4.2.1 | Ethical values

A growing number of corporate scandals and organizational crises in recent years have led to an increased importance of leadership ethics and the need for promoting conscious capitalism and social responsibility (e.g., Fyke & Buzzanell, 2013). We take this argument further and posit that addressing societal grand challenges requires even more adaptable, responsible, ethically charged, and sustainability-driven leadership that could facilitate building a more sustainable world. For example, fossil fuel companies face paradoxical tensions between business growth and environmental protection while addressing the climate change crisis (e.g., Ferns et al., 2019). In this regard, sustainability-focused leadership needs to understand and reconcile the inherent tension between shareholder value (i.e., short-term profit maximization) and stakeholder value (i.e., long-term value creation for current and future stakeholders). To achieve this, ethics and values are instrumental in providing a solid foundation for sustainability leadership practice (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018) and reflect the “inner voice” of an individual (Sharma, 2019). Further, the systems theory perspective on paradox opens up avenues to better comprehend sustainability and ethical decision-making-related tensions at the individual, organizational, and systems levels (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023). This perspective holds that multilevel tensions emerge when organizational leadership pursues divergent sustainability outcomes simultaneously. However, we argue in this paper that mindfulness and a deep embodiment of ethical values enable sustainability leadership to simultaneously address desirable yet conflicting ethical and business responsibilities.

Tuppen and Porritt (2003) postulate that ethical and moral principles including environmental justice, intergenerational equity, and stewardship underpin the sustainable development paradigm. Sustainability leadership incorporates “a way of being and acting” that hinges on ethical values and sustainability (Burns et al., 2015). Ethical values are standards that drive individuals' lives and are also vital elements of ethical behavior and actions (Schminke et al., 2015) to address complex sustainability issues (Burns et al., 2015) and enhance sustainable outcomes. Thus, leaders need to be able to understand the dynamics

TABLE 2 A consolidated summary of key sustainability leadership mechanisms.

Sustainability leadership	Salient dimensions	Description	Specific aspects (authors)
Individual-level mechanisms	Ethical values	Ethics and values provide the foundation for sustainability leadership practice	Value-based principles (Brandt, 2016; Burns et al., 2015; Galpin & Whittington, 2012); a sense of humility (Fernandez et al., 2020; Schad & Smith, 2019; Sharma, 2019; Visser & Courtice, 2011); ethical values (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018; Sharma, 2019); honesty, credibility, and integrity (Blok et al., 2015; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Sharma, 2019); respect for diverse cultures (Castelli, 2016); trust (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020); environmental stewardship and social equity (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021); moral intent (Blok et al., 2015); greater common good (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a, 2011c; Bendell & Little, 2015; Bendell et al., 2017; Burns et al., 2015; De Haan et al., 2015; Ferdig, 2007; Peterlin et al., 2015)
	Systems thinking	Systems thinking involves viewing sustainability as a whole and relying on connections to navigate a VUCA business environment	Intellectual flexibility and strategic agility (De Haan et al., 2015; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Ivory & Brooks, 2018; Tideman et al., 2013); holistic thinking (Ferdig, 2007; Fernandez et al., 2020; Grewatsch et al., 2021); cross-functional approach (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020); mutually beneficial relationships (De Haan et al., 2015); connections (Allen, 2018; Peterlin et al., 2015); paradoxical thinking to deal with systems-level tensions (Schad & Smith, 2019)
	Mindfulness	Mindfulness enables awareness of the present moments and considers individual experiences in a non-judgmental way	Reflection before action (Bolton, 2010); care for community (Levey & Levey, 2019); presence—the state of being in the present moment (Buchanan & Kern, 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Koskela & Schuyler, 2016); human consciousness (Koskela & Schuyler, 2016); social sustainability (Sajjad & Shahbaz, 2020); spiritual enlightenment (Heizmann & Liu, 2018); self-awareness and personal discipline (Whittington, 2017); interconnectedness (Burns et al., 2015)
	Reflective practice and reflexivity	Reflective practice helps to make sense of and analyze uncertain and complex situations	Self-reflection and critical reflection (Burns et al., 2015; Care et al., 2021; Castelli, 2016; Parkin, 2010); holistic perspective (Craig, 2020); questioning own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions (Bolton, 2010); conscious activity (Castelli, 2016); self-awareness (Burns et al., 2015; Castelli, 2016); deep probing, in-depth analysis, and making sense of assumptions (Burns et al., 2015; Care et al., 2021); reflective thinking (Raelin, 2002)
	Resilience	Resilience builds the ability to recover from crises	Business continuity and crisis recovery (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021); long-term orientation (Folke, 2006); preparedness and improvisation (Giustiniano et al., 2020); long-term survival (McCann & Sweet, 2014); collective resilience (Giustiniano et al., 2020); useful approach to address continuously evolving paradoxical situations (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Zhang et al., 2015)
Organizational-level mechanisms	Sustainability standards	Sustainability standards are the tools that stimulate desirable sustainability actions	Voluntary governance mechanisms (Christensen et al., 2017; Epstein, 2008; Haack & Rasche, 2021; Nava & Tampe, 2022); openness, accountability, and transparency (Epstein, 2008; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Rainey, 2013); proactivity (Rainey, 2013; Robinson et al., 2011); value creation through balancing between the financial and human interests (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010; Tideman et al., 2013; Yu & Zhao, 2015); diversity and empowerment (Fernandez et al., 2020)
	Sustainability-oriented corporate culture	A sustainability-oriented corporate culture requires a fundamental change in beliefs and values	Shared values and collaborative organizational culture (Škerlavaj, 2022); integration of sustainability dimensions into the organizational culture (Gerard et al., 2017; Kantabutra & Avery, 2011; McCann & Sweet, 2014; Paraschiv et al., 2012); change in beliefs and values (Armani et al., 2020); openness and knowledge sharing (Iqbal et al., 2020); inclusive culture (Evans, 2018; Fernandez et al., 2020); capacity building activities and group processes (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018; McGhee & Grant, 2017)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Sustainability leadership	Salient dimensions	Description	Specific aspects (authors)
	Stakeholder engagement	Stakeholder engagement promotes sustainability through a shared and collaborative decision-making process	Collaborative and open communication (Castelli, 2016; Iqbal et al., 2020; Schad & Smith, 2019; Visser & Courtice, 2011); knowledge sharing (Iqbal et al., 2020); cognitive diversity (Fernandez et al., 2020; Hahn et al., 2015); inclusive approach (Castelli, 2016; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Schad & Smith, 2019; Visser & Courtice, 2011); network building for sustainable business opportunities (De Haan et al., 2015); shared and collaborative decision-making process (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Schad & Smith, 2019; Škerlavaj, 2022); employee psychological empowerment (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021; Iqbal et al., 2020; Škerlavaj, 2022); stakeholder empowerment and value creation through relationships building (Freeman et al., 2020; Tideman et al., 2013); shared governance (Castelli, 2016; Denis et al., 2012; McGhee & Grant, 2017); mutual exploration of sustainable business opportunities (De Haan et al., 2015; Fernandez et al., 2020; Raelin, 2016; Schad & Smith, 2019); inclusiveness (Duchek, 2020; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Škerlavaj, 2022); continuous dialogue for strategy formulation (Galpin & Whittington, 2012; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Schad & Smith, 2019); stakeholder satisfaction (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2014a); collective wisdom and mutual goals (Hörisch et al., 2014; Raelin, 2016)

involved in a complex system and use their personal value systems to react to situations around them (Visser & Courtice, 2011). Against this background, Brandt (2016) and Galpin and Whittington (2012) have argued that sustainability leadership is based on value-based principles including virtue and character. Value-based leadership is a set of philosophies that highlight the relationship between one's actions and values. It is the role of the leader to incorporate sustainability thinking into the climate of the organization (Brandt, 2016) and uphold important personal and shared values including environmental stewardship, prudence, empowerment, innovation, and social equity (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021), a sense of humility (Fernandez et al., 2020; Hind et al., 2009; Sharma, 2019; Visser & Courtice, 2011) and deep sense of purpose (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Thus, promoting an ethical climate in the organization context is instrumental in bringing positive change within the organization and fostering sustainable outcomes for society.

4.2.2 | Systems thinking

Systems thinking is “a discipline for seeing wholes and a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots” (Senge, 1990, p. 68). Systems thinking is variously defined as “the ability to understand the interdependency of systems across the business and between the business and society” (Hind et al., 2009, p. 16). It is essential to recognize that complex sustainability problems such as climate change or biosphere integrity cannot be addressed in isolation (Whiteman et al., 2013), but

rather through embracing an integrative mindset. Organizations are in themselves complex systems that operate in a complex environment and ignoring the interconnectedness of the elements is reductionist (Fernandez et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017). We postulate that leadership functioning is not a result of the individual, but the system they operate in. Systems thinking enables sustainability leadership to evaluate and anticipate long-term trends affecting business and society, as well as embrace new thinking and mindsets by which leaders can empower their organizations toward the creation of sustainable value (Tideman et al., 2013). Systems thinking also recognizes the mutually embedded and interdependent nature of various systems and the significance of developing mutually beneficial relationships (De Haan et al., 2015). From this perspective, organizations, people, and the environment are in complex and dynamic relationships with one another, and thus acting alone and pursuing narrow self-interest is counterproductive to the sustainability of the entire system (Fernandez et al., 2020). Allen (2018, p. 217) argued that “connections shift self-interest to enlightened self-interest,” which enables improved outcomes for the entire system.

Furthermore, to cope with uncertainty and complexity leaders need to embrace unconventional approaches to address the challenging and often conflicting demands of varied stakeholders (Hind et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2015). Systems thinking appreciates the inherent complexity within the sustainability space and the importance of intellectual flexibility and strategic agility (De Haan et al., 2015; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Ivory & Brooks, 2018), which informs leaders' sense-making and ability to appreciate the

bigger picture and improve leadership performance (Hind et al., 2009). Thus, systems thinking is a vital ability to (i) make sense of the bigger picture concerning the role of corporations within social-ecological systems and (ii) address complex and dynamic global environmental and social problems (Grewatsch et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2017). Systems thinking encourages decision-makers to understand the complexity involved in tackling pressing sustainability issues and deviate radically from a reductionist approach to analysis to more holistic thinking (Grewatsch et al., 2021).

4.2.3 | Mindfulness

Mindfulness refers to “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). In contrast, habitual organizing serves as a pathway to unsustainable behaviors and actions. In this vein, mindfulness enables business leaders and organizations not only to assess the impact of organizational practices on society and the environment but also to address issues related to social justice underpinning business practices (Rashkova et al., 2023). Corner and Pavlovich (2016) explained the role of mindfulness as a metacognitive capacity-building mechanism that fosters resolving tensions arising from simultaneously pursuing divergent social and economic aspects.

Drawing on a systems theory perspective, Sajjad and Shahbaz (2020) argued that mindfulness is a novel approach to enhancing social sustainability outcomes at the individual, organizational, and societal levels including employee health and well-being, ethical behavior, pro-social behavior, and social equity. Wamsler and Brink (2018) suggested that “new narratives and social practices are needed to encourage a broader shift towards sustainability” (p. 59). The authors further asserted that mindfulness facilitates climate change adaptation and pro-environmental behavior. In a similar vein, Fry and Egel (2021) envisaged spirituality and mindfulness as critical aspects of sustainability leadership. Leadership needs to consider both the reflection process and mindfulness as these inner capabilities are vital to promote wisdom and care for ourselves, organizations, communities, and the wider society (Levey & Levey, 2019). According to Burns et al. (2015), sustainability leaders “are committed change agents, involved in work that reflects an emerging way of being that is rooted in interconnectedness, relationship, and mindfulness” (p. 90). The actions of such leaders originate from an inner shift in human consciousness, individual experiences of presence (Koskela & Schuyler, 2016), and “a deep sense of commitment to their values” (Burns et al., 2015, p. 90) to address complex sustainability issues.

Heizmann and Liu (2018) described sustainability leadership as a journey of spiritual enlightenment; while this paper does not take that approach, the general principles behind this line of thinking can shed some light on key attributes that are beneficial for individuals to espouse in this realm. Dhiman (2016) theorized that when individuals are lacking in the spiritual aspect, they become greedy and resort to actions that are detrimental to the sustainability of the planet. For

example, Ruedy and Schweitzer (2010) studied the relationship between mindfulness and ethical decision-making. The authors argued that unethical decisions are caused by a lack of awareness; however, mindfulness practice enables individuals to maintain personal integrity, act ethically, and uphold ethical standards. Further, Siqueira and Pitassi (2016) posited that an ethically informed perspective of mindfulness practice could help in promoting sustainability-oriented innovations. Burns et al. (2015) pointed out that recognizing the interconnectedness of the earth and other beings builds an authentic relationship that is essential for the mindset shift from resource depletion to mindful consumption. The overconsumption of resources is at the root of many sustainability issues, and maintaining this mindset is detrimental to all parties involved and will only exacerbate the issues (Ericson et al., 2014).

Mindfulness enables leaders to avoid behaving mechanically and promotes the self-reflection and critical reflection that are needed to simultaneously address complex sustainability issues (Kurucz et al., 2017; Parkin, 2010). Mindfulness permits leaders to better adapt their styles to different scenarios by acting nonjudgmentally (Baron et al., 2018), allowing them to be more effective by performing their roles wisely (Rooney et al., 2021). De Haan et al. (2015) stated that sustainability leaders embrace the presencing notion of “achieving one's highest future potential through a combination of sensing (feeling one's future possibility or purpose) and presence (the state of being in the present moment)” (p. 5). Presencing fosters reflection and careful observation, which, in turn, enables sustainability leaders to inspire and work to achieve their vision, which, in turn, fosters making meaningful socio-ecological contributions to society (Buchanan & Kern, 2017) and enhances sustainable development.

4.2.4 | Reflective practice and reflexivity

Reflective practice and reflexivity are states of mind that enable the reflector to consider and critically analyze events or situations to draw a deeper understanding of and insights into the potential implications of such events or circumstances (Bolton, 2010). Reflective practice is defined as “the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one's immediate environment about what has recently transpired”. Conversely, reflexivity is “the ability to see a problem holistically” (Craig, 2020, p. 1769) which enables problem solvers to effectively deal with critical societal problems and avoid short-sightedness. Bolton (2010) argued that reflexivity encourages questioning our “own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others” (p. 13) and our subtle relationships with the socio-ecological systems.

Accordingly, both reflective practice and reflexivity are critical to understanding uncertain, unique, or conflicted situations (Castelli, 2016) and making sense of social, ethical, economic, ecological, cultural, and political issues (Bolton, 2010; Kurucz et al., 2017). Reflective practice enables sustainability leaders to engage in a conscious and purposeful activity of self-reflection and critical reflection

(Castelli, 2016). Self-reflection enables individuals to reconnect with themselves, and to reflect on and understand their personal values, emotions, motives, assumptions, and goals enhancing self-awareness and their connections with others in communities (Burns et al., 2015; Castelli, 2016; Kurucz et al., 2017) which is critical to work collaboratively with others (Burns et al., 2015). In contrast, critical reflection fosters deep probing, in-depth analysis, and making sense of assumptions in the global context (Burns et al., 2015; Care et al., 2021; Kurucz et al., 2017), providing a sound basis for improved decision-making (Maak & Pless, 2006; Raelin, 2002) concerning complex sustainability issues. Reflective practice stimulates reflexive thinking (Raelin, 2002) to analyze internal and external contexts that help in the holistic understanding of the situation (Burns et al., 2015) and the evolving and complex demands placed on sustainability leadership.

Reflective practice is imperative to cope with change and uncertainty and promote an organizational culture where people can challenge existing practices and governing values without fear of retribution and share their opinions, learning, and insights with others (Egleston et al., 2017; Raelin, 2002). Reflective practice in sustainability leadership provides a pathway to envision how leaders might steer paradoxical sustainability tensions (Van Neerijnen et al., 2021) and navigate complex and dynamic multilevel systemic interactions.

4.2.5 | Resilience

Resilience is a complex construct and scholars have studied resilience from diverse perspectives. The concept of resilience is conceived as a trait or ability (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; Werner & Smith, 2001), a meta-capability (Duchek, 2020), a dynamic process (Luthar, 2006), and an outcome (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005). While scholarly consensus is lacking on the collective definition and conceptual framing of the resilience concept (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021), it is broadly conceived as the ability of an individual to effectively bounce back or thrive in response to adverse circumstances (e.g., Luthans et al., 2010; Rutter, 2008).

Resilience recognizes the importance of elements, namely, “non-linear dynamics, thresholds, uncertainty, and surprise” (Folke, 2006, p. 253). Sustainability leadership functions within the VUCA business environment in which unanticipated events, unexpected crises, and abrupt changes trigger disruptions to an organization's routine and threats to its survival (Duchek, 2020). These unforeseen crises and tragedies “call for leadership that builds resilience in the face of danger” (Giustiniano et al., 2020, p. 971) to effectively navigate the impact of such disruptive events and foster future success through the process of adaptation (Duchek, 2020). In this context, both applicability and understanding of resilience are critical from business continuity and crisis management perspectives (Duchek, 2020).

Sustainability leadership is not only about building individual resilience but also about promoting collective resilience (Giustiniano et al., 2020; Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018) that helps organizations develop appropriate resilient responses and recover from a crisis (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). Sustainability leaders with a resilient

mindset have a long-term orientation and are capable of shifting their mindset from reactivity to recovery, renewal, reorganization, and development modes (Folke, 2006). Resilience-focused sustainability leadership is best positioned to successfully address critical paradoxical tensions and attempts to maintain a delicate balance between contradictory elements such as present and future, anticipation and adaptation, profit, and purpose (Zheng et al., 2018), “preparedness and improvisation, clear direction-setting, and flexibility in the face of specific circumstances” (Giustiniano et al., 2020, p. 972).

4.3 | Organizational-level mechanisms

Sustainability leadership functioning at the organizational level is a diverse, dynamic, and complex process. The following discussion explicates the key underlying organizational-level mechanisms defining the role of sustainability leadership in an organizational setting and their interaction and relationship with stakeholders and wider society to address complex and emergent sustainability issues. In particular, we focus on sustainability standards, sustainability-oriented corporate culture, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms to capture sustainability leadership functioning in the organizational context (Table 2).

4.3.1 | Sustainability standards

Sustainability standards are considered as voluntary governance tools for stimulating desirable ethical and responsible corporate behaviors to address competing sustainability concerns (Christensen et al., 2017; Haack & Rasche, 2021; Nava & Tampe, 2022). Further, sustainability standards provide a guiding framework for planning and implementation of sustainable business strategy and contribute to consistency, comparability, and transparency in communicating sustainability to corporate stakeholders (Epstein, 2008). In this context, sustainability leadership has a key role in the formulation and enactment of sustainability standards, as well as in ensuring their effective diffusion across inter- and intra-organizational levels (Epstein, 2008). Sustainability standards are significant as companies are increasingly expected to demonstrate openness, transparency, and accountability to their stakeholders about strategic decisions and actions (Rainey, 2013; Vigneau et al., 2015).

Epstein and Roy (2003) provided one of the most widely used conceptual framings of the sustainability concept that divides it into nine distinct principles that can be incorporated into decision-making processes. These principles comprise ethics, governance, transparency, business relationships, financial returns, community development, the value of products and services, employment practices, and protection of the environment (Epstein, 2008). However, these principles could potentially cause tensions that sustainability leadership must address by accepting and embracing mechanisms and creating a subtle balance between these conflicting yet coexisting principles (Hahn et al., 2018; Nava & Tampe, 2022).

Soltani (2014) investigated the underlying reasons for the corporate scandals and revealed that the root causes were a lack of ethical behavior and values on the part of the leadership, poor ethical organizational climate, inefficient governance mechanisms, and the worst deliberate acts of greed and a lack of accountability. Additionally, sustainability leadership is also responsible for promoting an ethical climate in organizations and maintaining transparency and accountability to stakeholders through sustainability reporting and seeking inclusion in the “best of class” sustainability indexes such as Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI) (Robinson et al., 2011). To accomplish this, sustainability leadership needs to embed three core principles—ethics, governance, and transparency (Rainey, 2013). Without these, any initiatives that organizations put into effect concerning sustainable development are mere “band-aids” to the issues unless there are fundamental shifts in these areas.

According to Epstein (2008), ethics requires that the organization maintains ethical standards and practices in dealings with all stakeholders, whether employees, consumers, or other groups of stakeholders. When organizations operate from an ethical standpoint, the practices and systems they set in place are more likely to promote these values, and these are communicated to their stakeholders (Galpin & Whittington, 2012). Governance ensures that the organization embraces the stakeholder value paradigm, takes responsibility for its resources, and recognizes the obligation of company management to its stakeholders. To reinforce sustainable corporate governance, sustainability leadership needs to create a fine balance between the financial and human interests of all its stakeholders (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010) and establish appropriate accountability mechanisms and control systems so that resources are not misappropriated by those with the ability to do so (Rainey, 2013). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) identified transparency as one of the five action principles that are required for sustainability to be put into practice.

Business relationships require that organizations provide fair trading practices with their partners (Epstein, 2008). The community is a valuable stakeholder as they are likely (potential) consumers who contribute directly to the success of organizations. Community development dictates that the company should develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the local community (De Haan et al., 2015) and broader society. This applies to larger-scale communities as well: For instance, organizations that set up operations in different countries must be sensitive to the cultural context (Epstein, 2008). Further, organizations need to implement employment practices that promote development, diversity, and empowerment (Fernandez et al., 2020). Additionally, organizations need to ensure that the right individuals are equipped to tackle societal grand challenges. Organizations have begun to acknowledge the strategic importance of sustainability and the need to address this by making a change to their management team (Wiengarten et al., 2017).

The economic side of organizations has long been the sole focus of leadership, and while this is no longer the case, it is still essential that companies remain economically stable, and sustainability can

help with achieving this goal. Organizations must transform their financial priorities to integrate environmental and social aspects into business operations (Farrukh et al., 2023). The value creation theory implies that incorporating environmental and social elements into company strategies can reduce business risk and increase long-term value creation (Yu & Zhao, 2015). The principle of financial returns focuses on the return on investment that is provided to investors to promote the survival of the company (Epstein, 2008). The value of products and services is also essential to the survival of organizations as customer perceptions affect their spending. If customers suspect that they are not receiving adequate quality products and services, they are likely to turn to competitors to fulfill this need (Epstein, 2008).

4.3.2 | Sustainability-oriented corporate culture

It is imperative to develop a culture of sustainability in an organization to achieve sustainable outcomes (Galpin et al., 2015); however, one of the most critical obstacles that hinder the success of any change is organizational culture (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Sustainability leadership focuses on building communities with shared values and collaborative cultures (Evans, 2018; Škerlavaj, 2022) that foster innovation, creativity, and sustainability in organizations (Baumgartner, 2009; Bernal et al., 2018; Gerard et al., 2017; Škerlavaj, 2022). To this end, developing an in-depth “understanding of organizational values provides potential insights into generating contingent-based change programs for corporate sustainability implementation” (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010, p. 363). Thus, new ways of thinking and working must be discovered and developed to address pressing sustainability challenges (Dyllick & Muff, 2016).

Sustainability leadership has a key role in promoting the integration of sustainability dimensions into the organizational culture (Gerard et al., 2017; Kantabutra & Avery, 2011; McCann & Sweet, 2014; Paraschiv et al., 2012) and overcoming the challenges of embedding sustainability in an organization. Fostering a sustainability-oriented culture requires a fundamental change in beliefs and values (Armani et al., 2020), as well as openness and knowledge sharing (Iqbal et al., 2020). There needs to be a shift from values that emphasize profit to those that seek to integrate the three Ps—people, planet, and profit (Burnes, 2017). According to Fernandez et al. (2020), sustainability leadership stimulates an inclusive culture where leadership is nurtured at all levels of an organization by fostering cognitive diversity and encouraging opinion sharing. A sustainability-focused culture guides the workforce in their behavior and decision-making in favor of economic efficiency, environmental responsibility, and social equity (Paraschiv et al., 2012).

4.3.3 | Stakeholder engagement

Sustainability is the outcome of stakeholder demands (Herremans et al., 2016; Hörisch et al., 2014); therefore, it stands to reason that

stakeholder engagement must be actively pursued by sustainability leadership. Stakeholder relationships and their connection with others are valuable units of analysis for businesses (Freeman et al., 2020). While the stakeholder perspective provides valuable narratives on business and society relationships, tensions emerge from addressing divergent stakeholder demands (Barney & Harrison, 2020; Eweje et al., 2021). Stakeholder management is not just satisfying the demands of one stakeholder; notwithstanding, integrating the demands of varied stakeholder groups promotes sustainability (Arnold, 2017). Competing priorities from stakeholders compromise the decision-making process and have the potential to create internal conflicts and paradoxical tensions.

Accordingly, rather than focusing on the trade-offs that different stakeholders can cause, the stakeholder engagement perspective acknowledges the mutual goals that bind them (Hörisch et al., 2014) and that value is co-created through relationships (Freeman et al., 2020). When leaders are equipped, they transform these tensions into sources of adaptability and resilience. In this context, sustainability leadership goes beyond the management of stakeholders approach and embraces more engaging, democratic, shared, distributed, collective, and relational approaches (i.e., shared governance) by which value is collaboratively created for all and sustainability issues are addressed in an integrative way (Castelli, 2016; Denis et al., 2012; Kurucz et al., 2017; McGhee & Grant, 2017). That said, no individual organization, industry, or nation has the knowledge, capacity, or resources to address sustainability-related issues single-handedly (Gray & Stites, 2013). Accordingly, sustainability leadership needs to engage in stakeholder dialog and enhance the knowledge base through active participation in multi-stakeholder networks that in turn, help in effectively tackling societal grand challenges. Multi-stakeholder networks refer to “a web of groups, organizations and/or individuals who come together to address a complex and shared cross-boundary problem, issue or opportunity” (Svendsen & Laberge, 2005, p. 92).

Hence, it is argued that sustainability leadership must recognize the value of promoting collaboration across organizational boundaries (Schad & Smith, 2019) and embracing the principle of shared value and inclusiveness (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Škerlavaj, 2022), which contributes to improved sustainable outcomes (Labelle et al., 2019). Further, sustainability leadership recognizes the significance of deconstructing silos by engaging in continuous dialog with the various stakeholders and funneling these discussions into the formulation of strategy and business processes (Galpin & Whittington, 2012; Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020; Schad & Smith, 2019) suitable to effectively deal with societal grand challenges.

5 | DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper addresses the research question: What are the underlying individual and organizational-level mechanisms of the sustainability leadership phenomenon? Building on a systems theory perspective on

paradox, we have developed an integrative sustainability leadership framework that explicates the role of individual-level mechanisms (ethics values, systems thinking, mindfulness, reflective practice and reflexivity, and resilience) and organizational-level mechanisms (sustainability standards, sustainability-oriented corporate culture, and stakeholder relationship management) and how these individual and organizational-level sustainability leadership mechanisms enable achieving organizational and societal sustainability.

Drawing on the systems theory perspective on paradox, first, we demonstrated that sustainability leadership functions within and across multilevel systemic domains (Schad & Bansal, 2018). Accordingly, we argue that realizing effective sustainability leadership functioning at individual and organizational levels could create positive spillover effects on realizing a more sustainable and flourishing society. Second, our analysis revealed that sustainability leadership continually faces diverse paradoxical tensions while addressing divergent yet interrelated sustainability concerns. Thus, to effectively deal with such paradoxical tensions, sustainability leadership needs to deal with such tensions and exhibit ambidextrous behavior to balance competing yet coexisting demands by accepting and embracing tensions rather than rejecting them (Hahn et al., 2018; Nava & Tampe, 2022; Schad et al., 2016; Van Neerijnen et al., 2021).

5.1 | Future research agenda

Our review proposes opportunities for advancing a multilevel understanding of the sustainability leadership phenomenon in four ways. First, given the nascent state of research into sustainability leadership and recent calls for more empirical research on sustainability leadership (e.g., Heizmann & Liu, 2018; Sharma, 2019), we propose that scholars could empirically validate the applicability of our multilevel sustainability leadership framework and its theoretical claims in the real-world context. Second, while paradoxes and tensions are entrenched in leadership functioning (e.g., Pearce et al., 2019; Schad & Smith, 2019; Zheng et al., 2018), there is a paucity of research that has investigated paradoxical tensions in leadership literature in general and sustainability leadership in particular. Thus, we hope the insights presented in this paper encourage further discussion and research in this relatively new but potentially rich field of inquiry.

Third, sustainability considers the importance of social, economic, environmental, political, and cultural systems, as well as their interdependencies in a complex and dynamic relationship. As multilevel interactions take place between individual, organizational, and societal levels, there exist rich opportunities for researchers to examine how sustainability leadership operates in diverse multilevel environments and effectively addresses systems-level sustainability tensions. Fourth, as businesses, organizations, and society are currently gripped by the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we suggest an empirical study examining how leadership has responded to societal grand challenges during the crisis and its implications for sustainability in terms of micro, meso, and macro levels.

5.2 | Theoretical implications

This paper contributes to sustainability leadership literature in three ways. First, earlier research has looked at sustainability and leadership-related issues and conceptualizations in rather isolated ways. We argue how the two concepts are related and need to be synthesized. To this end, we conducted an extensive review of recent scholarly literature and contributed to sustainability leadership theory building in a holistic way. Prior leadership literature focused on several related concepts (pertinent but narrowly designated sustainability issues) that may have implications for businesses and society (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018), such as ethical leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, value-based leadership, shared leadership, and responsible leadership (e.g., Brandt, 2016). However, leadership that focused explicitly on sustainability issues has been lacking. Accordingly, this paper expands academic scholarship on sustainability leadership by developing substantive linkages between sustainability and leadership concepts.

Second, while existing leadership literature does examine leadership at multiple levels, the focus primarily remains on either the individual or the micro level, and there is limited conceptualization beyond that. The integrative multilevel sustainability leadership framework introduced in this paper demonstrates how contextual conditions shape, influence, and/or interact with individual (micro) processes (e.g., perceptions, reflexivity, values, and cognitions), which in turn influences organizational (meso) processes (e.g., leaders' sustainability actions, behaviors, and functioning). An in-depth understanding of these complex and dynamic interfaces between contextual, micro-, and meso-level processes determines the extent to which sustainability leadership contributes to addressing societal grand challenges (macro) (e.g., climate change, poverty, and social equity) (Slawinski et al., 2017; Tuazon et al., 2021). Thus, our framework moves away from the overly linear and fragmented conceptualization of the sustainability leadership concept and provides novel insights into emerging literature by systemically integrating micro-, meso-, and macro-level processes. Third, there have been several calls for conducting research across disciplines since management issues have mostly multi-disciplinary implications. In this context, we contribute by offering some plausible research pathways and research directions that could help advance interdisciplinary research scholarship at the crossroads of the sustainability and leadership disciplines.

5.3 | Practical implications

This paper contributes to business practice in three ways. First, in this paper, we posited that sustainability leadership is imperative to effectively address pressing global sustainability issues such as global climate change, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, and socioeconomic inequality. Our analysis demonstrates that organizations are operating in diverse settings that are increasingly complex, dynamic, and exhibiting uncertainty. In these environmental contexts, organizations are expected to address divergent yet interconnected sustainability issues

emerging from diverse stakeholders' demands. Sustainability leadership is best placed to tackle paradoxical sustainability tensions in multilevel interconnected systems and deliver improved sustainability outcomes at organizational and societal levels. However, the pursuit of sustainability leadership involves organizations focusing on developing an in-depth understanding of the diverse contexts in which organizations operate and recognizing the importance of individual-level mechanisms including ethical values, systems thinking, mindfulness, reflective practice and reflexivity, and resilience in sustainability leadership functioning. These individual-level mechanisms have a significant role in promoting pro-sustainability culture, diffusion and adoption of sustainability standards, and collaborative stakeholder engagement toward addressing pressing sustainability issues at the organizational and societal levels.

Second, our findings provide some useful insights into leadership development programs and fostering sustainability leadership in the corporate world that is cognizant of its role in society. The focus of such programs should be on the sharpening of the individual-level sustainability leadership aspects and how these aspects relate to the organizational-level implementation of sustainability practices. Lastly, the world is besieged by extraordinarily complex, interrelated, and evolving societal grand challenges that endanger the sustainability of the current and future generations. Accordingly, this paper is timely, as senior practitioners and policymakers in various professional domains and functional areas could benefit from recognizing and understanding the urgent need and significance of the sustainability leadership phenomenon and its effective and holistic implementation in tackling societal grand challenges.

6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper focused on a pressing, timely yet under-researched area of practice and scholarship—sustainability leadership. The purpose of this paper was to review and synthesize the growing body of knowledge that examines and integrates sustainability and leadership concepts and presents a state-of-the-art understanding of the sustainability leadership phenomenon. To this end, we conducted an extensive review and critical analysis of sustainability leadership literature and presented an integrative framework that incorporates and extends past research on sustainability leadership. While the concept of sustainability leadership is gaining currency as a novel form of leadership that could effectively tackle societal grand challenges, the literature in this research domain remains diverse and fragmented due to its complex multidimensional nature and interconnected multilevel implications. By reviewing, synthesizing, and critically examining the diverse multidimensional and multilevel aspects of sustainability leadership, we proposed an integrative sustainability leadership framework that assimilates disjointed albeit diverse literature on sustainability and leadership concepts. Building on the systems theory perspective on paradox, the framework proposed in this paper offers an improved understanding of conceptual framing and operationalization of the sustainability leadership concept. In addition, we proposed research

insights and potential pathways to extend sustainability leadership scholarship and improve managerial practice.

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