ECO-CENTRIC LEADERSHIP – TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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Purpose: Environmental problems, such as climate change and biosphere degradation, present new business challenges. On the one hand, companies are striving to maintain efficiency and gain a competitive advantage, while on the other, they are obligated to balance environmental, social and economic objectives. Such a new reality of business requires a rethinking of the role of leadership in taking conscious and effective ecological action by modern companies. It also calls for research efforts to develop alternative leadership models that promote sustainable development.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper is theoretical and based on an in-depth review of the literature, including, on the one hand, an analysis of well-established leadership models (and how they relate to companies' effective eco-innovation activities) and, on the other, a characterization of the new leadership theories needed to overcome the challenges of sustainable development.

Findings: The paper aimed to develop a theoretical conceptualization of eco-centric leadership that complements the leadership literature and is relevant to understanding the research landscape of this new leadership style. The considerations presented in the paper point to the need for further scientific work that can use the developed conceptual framework to clarify the importance of eco-centric leadership in achieving harmony and balance between human activities and the natural world.

Originality/value: The paper's critical scientific contribution includes the developed conceptual framework, which covers five domains representing character, characteristics, people practices, institutional practices, and outcomes. This framework allows a more comprehensive characterization of this new and valuable leadership style.

Keywords: Eco-centric leadership, conceptual model, theoretical framework.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The impact of leadership on companies' environmental performance is not a new one, as it is characterized by a broad literature linking various and interrelated behaviors, practices, and leadership styles leading to the achievement of sustainability goals (Avery, Bergsteiner,

2011; Chen, Chang, 2013; Hallinger et al., 2018; Knight, Paterson, 2018; Egri, Herman, 2000; Singh et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021; Boeske, Murray, 2022; Nisha et al., 2022; Zafar et al., 2022; Boeske, 2023; Eustachio et al., 2023; He et al., 2023; Saif et al., 2023). Leaders directly influence organizational members by setting formal rules and procedures that determine the organization's structure and culture (Boeske, Murray, 2022), play a crucial role in formulating and implementing organizational strategy (Liu et al., 2023), inspire subordinates and motivate them to generate innovation (Vaccaro et al., 2012), and help create an organizational climate that stimulates organizational creativity (Chen, Chang, 2013).

While researchers generally agree that leaders are the 'key interpreters' of how organizations respond to environmental challenges (Boeske, Murray, 2022), existing research needs to be more conclusive. Boeske (2023) argues that due to the complexity of environmental issues, no single leadership style (or set of behaviors) required of environmental CEOs can be identified. Nevertheless, for companies' environ-mental activities not to be incidental, concern for the environment should be ingrained in the executives' minds, and respect for environ-mental issues should almost be part of their DNA. Consequently, the concept of eco-centric leadership has emerged in the literature, which, unlike other leadership styles, involves the implementation of a clear and committed strategy, making environmental ideals the basis of a company's ethos (Biswas et al., 2022; Zafar et al., 2023). This leadership approach prioritizes environmental issues, emphasizing environ-mental responsibility and taking action beyond expected levels of environmental performance (Al-Amin et al., 2021; Hasan et al., 2024).

The concept of eco-centric leadership, like any new concept, has yet to be recognized in the literature and, as a result, opens up a vast and valuable field of research in management theory. The critical review of the literature indicates that one of the two leading streams of re-search is to relate the well-recognized models of leadership – transformational, transactional, ethical, responsible, and servant – to effective eco-innovative activities in companies. A consequence of this research and its indisputable contribution to management theory is the characterization of green transformational- (Chen, Chang, 2013; Singh et al., 2020) and green transactional leadership (Saif et al., 2023), environmentally responsible leadership (Wang et al., 2021), as well as environmentally specific servant leadership (Zafar et al., 2022). The second broad research stream attempts to develop new leadership theories by characterizing the leadership goals and practices necessary to overcome sustainable development challenges. This domain of literature encompasses narratives on sustainable leadership (Avery, Bergsteiner, 2011; Hallinger et al., 2018; Nisha et al., 2022), sustainability leadership (Knight, Paterson, 2018; Eustachio et al., 2023) and environmental leadership (Egri, Herman, 2000; He et al., 2023), based on both empirical findings and bibliographic analyses, complemented by researchers' (Boeske, 2023) attempts to compare these three related leadership approaches.

Undoubtedly, these two research streams are relevant to understanding the research landscape of eco-centric leadership. They are also complementary, so it is possible to apply them together. This observation is relevant to the development of an eco-centric leadership

framework, which is the intention of the author of this paper. Another critical assumption is that leadership is often a paradox (Mango, 2018), and therefore, as in the analysis of other paradoxes in management, it is embedded in a context that both determines it and provides a strategic reference for it.

The paper aims to develop an integrated (i.e., based on synergy concerning the two research streams indicated above) concept of eco-centric leadership, which, to the best of the author's knowledge, has yet to be presented in the literature. The point of reference was Mango's (2018) synthesis of well-recognized leadership theories, providing the basis for describing the analytical framework of eco-centric leadership in five domains representing the character, characteristics, people practices, institutional practices, and outcomes. The proposed conceptual model represents the most current and dynamically developing research area concerning environmental activities at the organizational level. In addition, the conceptual framework attempts to contribute to management theory and can be the basis for conducting well-planned and consistent future empirical research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Well-recognized models of leadership vs environmental activities

Numerous definitions of leadership have been formulated in the literature. Despite their differences, there are three common elements: leadership is a group phenomenon, involves interpersonal influence to achieve established organizational goals, and is a process focused on taking specific actions (Boeske, 2023). Mango (2018) defines leadership as influencing internal and external stakeholders by challenging the status quo, developing a clear vision, engaging subordinates, and taking action to meet short- and long-term development goals. Many conceptual models describing leadership in organizations have been developed in the literature. Northouse (2016) analyzes 16 of them, Mango (2018) synthesizes 22 theories representing fundamental conceptualizations of leadership, and Kellerman (2012) goes a step further, stating that there are more than 40 leading theories in the described domain of literature. Relating well-recognized leadership models to undertaking and conducting ecological activities, transformational and transactional, ethical, accountable, and servant leadership receive the most attention from researchers.

According to the model by Bass (1985), the critical difference between transactional and transformational leadership is the degree of the leader's involvement and the nature of his relationship with subordinates. Transactional leadership refers to building a bond between the leader and the organizational members based on the mutual benefits of such a relationship (Vaccaro et al., 2012; Kang et al., 2015). Con-tingent reward dimension and active or passive

management by exception represent the spectrum of transactional leadership behavior (Bass, Avolio, 1993). Both dimensions deal with the contractual relationship between the leader and subordinates by reinforcing their commitment through monitoring and correcting the assigned tasks and giving rewards for effective and timely their completion (Vaccaro et al., 2012; Kang et al., 2015; Pichlak, 2020). On the other hand, transformational leadership is based not so much on extrinsic motivation (an exchange relationship) but on intrinsic motivation. Such leaders consider not only the interests but also the psychological needs of subordinates (Pichlak, 2020). This leadership style emphasizes not the consent or submission of subordinates but their commitment – the work becomes a challenge for them, as it goes beyond their self-interest to realize the goals of the team and the organization (Yukl, 2006). Trans-formational leadership implies a solid emotional connection between the leader and the organizational members and covers four dimensions: inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, idealized influence, and intellectual stimulation.

By referring transactional leadership to the company's environmental activities, researchers not only expand on the term 'green transactional leadership' (Saif et al., 2023) but also argue that through an open, feedback-based relationship between the leader and subordinates and, in particular, by clearly expressing expectations and setting environmental goals, this leadership style can positively influence environmental actions (Boeske, 2023). The literature also emphasizes that the growing environmental awareness of consumers and social and legal pressures to reduce negative environmental impacts reinforce the need for CEOs to set simple and transparent goals and principles for their environmental activities (Pichlak, 2020). Moreover, as Vaccaro et al. (2012) argue, such a leadership style can foster the generation of innovation, as it contributes to reducing organizational complexity, which often significantly limits the effectiveness of the innovation process. Also prevalent in the literature is the notion of 'green transformational leadership' (Chen, Chang, 2013; Singh et al., 2020), understood as such behaviors of leaders that provide subordinates with a clear vision and inspiration, motivate them to take environmental activities, and support their development needs towards achieving the environmental goals of the organization. The results of studies con-ducted in the literature (Chen, Chang, 2013; Kang et al., 2015; Pichlak, 2020) indicate that this leadership style's impact on effective pro-environmental activities is positive and significant. Through inspirational motivation, leaders are catalysts for change, motivating subordinates to acquire new knowledge and develop eco-innovations (Singh et al., 2020). Through individualized consideration, transformational leaders recognize the efforts of organizational members by indicating that their work matters and is valued by the management team. Through idealized influence, leaders stimulate the creativity of subordinates. Intellectual stimulation means that leaders use their knowledge to increase the awareness of organizational members (regarding the economic viability of opportunities and the environmental and social implications of their exploitation), encouraging subordinates to seek environmentally safe – not just economically efficient – solutions (Pichlak, 2020).

Another leadership theory applied in the literature in the context of conducting environmentally friendly business is ethical leadership, defined as 'the demonstration of 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). Initially, the ethical leadership style was analyzed within the framework of transformational leadership theory (Şengüllendi et al., 2023), according to the assumption that leaders motivate and inspire subordinates and become role models for them by a high level of morality and high ethics. After the groundbreaking work of Brown et al. (2005), ethical leadership developed as a stand-alone leadership style in which the central idea is the normative aspects, i.e., ethics, morality, and integrity (Brown, Trevino, 2006) and responsibility (Ren et al., 2020) of leaders. It has also been proven that an ethical leadership style can increase the effectiveness of subordinates and lead them to develop environmental behavior (Şengüllendi et al., 2023). The results of other studies further indicate that ethical leadership positively influences the green creativity of organizational members and their propensity to generate eco-innovations (Khalili, 2016) and strengthens the use of green human resource management practices in the organization (Ren et al., 2020).

Normative issues, including an emphasis on an ethical business, are also highlighted within the concept of responsible leadership, defined as 'a relational and ethical phenomenon that occurs in social processes of interaction with those who affect or are affected by leadership and have a stake in the purpose and vision of the leadership relationship' (Maak, Pless, 2006, p. 103). This leadership style extends the sense of responsibility of the CEO from internal to external stakeholders and even to society as a whole (Wang et al., 2021) and future generations (Liu et al., 2023). Responsible leaders consider the interests of all parties – organizational members, customers, suppliers, partners, and other stakeholders – ethically and inclusively, balancing their economic priorities with meeting social goals (Maak, Pless, 2006). Regarding environmental behavior, the results of studies conducted in the literature indicate that CEO environmentally responsible leadership is indirectly and positively related to companies' commitment to eco-innovation (Wang et al., 2021) and positively stimulates sustain-able business performance (Liu et al., 2023).

Similar to the concept of responsible leadership, servant leadership theory is also gaining increasing academic attention. The central idea of this theory, introduced by Greenleaf, is that the welfare of subordinates is to prioritize the welfare of subordinates over the self-interest of leaders. The second central idea is that the leader shares power and status to meet the needs of subordinates, the organization as a whole, and the people the organization serves (Washington et al., 2014). Some researchers note the similarity between servant and transformation-al leadership (Washington et al., 2014). However, Chin and Smith (2006) argue that although both types of leadership aim to achieve similar goals (appreciating, motivating, and inspiring subordinates), they are driven by different motivations, strategies, and personal values of the leaders. Finally, by relating servant leadership to initiating and conducting effective

environmental activities, Zafar et al. (2022) introduce the concept of environmentally specific servant leadership and argue that this leadership style is positively associated with voluntary pro-environmental behavior through organizational identity.

2.2. New leadership theories vs environmental activities

Despite the unquestionable contribution of well-recognized leadership models to undertaking environmental activities, the changes in organizations' environments led to the development of new leadership theories, described in the literature as sustainable leadership, sustainability leadership, and environmental leadership. Although some researchers treat the above terms interchangeably (Hallinger et al., 2018), the paper analyzes each concept separately, pointing out their vital distinguishing goals and unique leadership roles.

Sustainable leadership is distinguished by its emphasis on leaders' social and environmental responsibility (Boeske, 2023). Collective concern for the environment indicates that the central idea in this theory is sharing the leadership roles (Nisha et al., 2022) rather than taking action only by the leaders (Hallinger et al., 2018). In other words, sustainable leadership is realized through collective or distributed efforts involving multiple stakeholders from within and outside the organization (Hallinger et al., 2018). An equally important feature of sustainable leadership is the preservation and maintenance of the organization (Boeske, 2023), i.e., the leader's pursuit of not only the short-term but, more importantly, the long-term vision of its development. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011, p. 5) point out that 'sustainable leadership re-quires taking a long-term perspective in making decisions; fostering systemic innovation aimed at increasing customer value; developing a skilled, loyal, and highly engaged workforce; and offering quality products, services, and solutions'.

In sustainability leadership, a leader must take action based on sustainability values (Boeske, 2023). In other words, the role of the leader is to take both sustainable and economically viable actions. Eustachio et al. (2023) define sustainability leader as 'person who motivates and influences followers in order to overcome sustainability barriers and address sustainability challenges, guaranteeing that society meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Moreover, in this theory, leaders are more results-oriented (Knight, Paterson, 2018), planning and developing business goals immanently linked to reducing growing environ-mental pressures and meeting changing societal expectations.

Finally, the environmental leadership model primarily emphasizes leaders' values, beliefs, and attitudes (Boeske, 2023). Egri and Herman (2000) describe this type of leadership as the ability of leaders to influence subordinates and mobilize the organization to achieve a long-term environmental sustainability vision. He et al. (2023, p. 2) define environmental leaders as 'the ones having a heightened sense of aware-ness about environmental protection, believing in eco-centric values, being more attentive to stakeholders' expectation, and being ready to implement various approaches to protect the environment, such as environmental management systems,

minimizing greenhouse gas emissions, and improving environmental ethics'. In summary, compared to other leadership concepts, environmental leaders are characterized by a personal ecological belief system and will thus engage in pro-environmental activities.

3. Eco-centric leadership

The following section presents an analytical framework for eco-centric leadership, for which Mango's (2018) synthesis of 22 leadership theories was the point of reference. Consideration of five core domains, including character, characteristics, people practices, institutional practices, and outcomes, highlights that eco-centric leadership is not only rooted in a set of leaders' personal values but is also embedded in a specific organizational context that both determines it and is its strategic reference.

3.1. The character domain

Researchers argue that ethical values and moral authority are critical attributes of a good leader. An eco-centric leader should represent high ethical and moral standards and have a deep-rooted passion for taking environmental actions. For an eco-centric leader, more efficient use of resources, cleaner technologies, product and organizational eco-innovations are non-negotiable choices. An eco-centric leader is not guided by an economic imperative since concern for the environment is one of his immanent character traits. Thus, an eco-centric leader is linked to ethical leadership by ethics, morality, and honesty, to responsible leadership by responsibility, and to environmental leadership by a system of crucial ecological values.

3.2. The characteristics domain

The characteristics domain encompasses the distinctive qualities of a leader, i.e., intelligence, reasonableness, maturity, innovation, self-awareness, and determination, which evoke the respect, admiration, and trust of subordinates and provide organizational members with a sense of the existence of shared values. It is essential to highlight not only the similarity to ethical leadership, but also to transformational leadership, through idealized influence, the behavioral equivalent of charisma. Eco-centric leaders (like ethical and transformational leaders) – respected and widely trusted – are an authority for subordinates, which makes organizational members deeply convinced of the possibility of realizing the vision of an eco-centric leader and wanting to emulate him. This emphasis on trust and respect in eco-centric leader-ship not only makes the audience feel secure and confident in their leadership but also inspires them to strive for similar qualities.

3.3. The domain of people practices

Some leadership theories view the process of exerting influence through developing a strong emotional bond between the leader and sub-ordinates (transformational leadership). In contrast, others point to establishing contractual ties (transactional leadership). In eco-centric leadership, the leader's beliefs and value system provide the source of motivation and inspiration and are a vital element in building his relationship with his subordinates. Such an assumption is the basis of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), according to which subordinates learn by observing the behavior of their superiors and adopt their attitudes by building a network of mutual interactions (Şengüllendi et al., 2023). An eco-centric leader encourages subordinates to act pro-environmentally by establishing an environmental epistemology at the individual and group levels (Al-Amin et al., 2021), thus building in subordinates an awareness of their environmental impact and developing their environmental sensitivity. Like a transformational leader, an eco-centric leader stimulates and inspires organizational members to increase their efforts by arousing their emotions toward the consequences of their work. Characterizing the domain of human practices, it is also possible to point out the similarity of eco-centric leadership to servant leadership, with the caveat that leaders put the welfare of the environment above self-interest and prompt subordinates to consider environmental impacts when taking any action.

3.4. The domain of institutional practices

The domain of institutional practices includes creating organizational goals, establishing systems, policies, and company procedures, and monitoring the degree of their implementation (Mango, 2018). Eco-centric leaders link the organization's strategic direction to achieving established environmental goals. The long-term time horizon for achieving such goals shows the similarity of eco-centric leadership to sustainable leadership. Eco-centric leaders formulate a shared and ecological vision for the organization's development, create a strategy aiming to meet environmental goals, provide the resources and support needed to achieve them, develop an effective incentive system, and build an ecological organizational culture, creating coherence between the organization's goals and shared values. When realizing such goals is uncertain, eco-centric leaders aim to reduce them as much as possible by analyzing environmental activity's internal and external risks. Such an observation indicates that an eco-centric leader can – under certain circumstances – demonstrate behaviors characteristic of transactional leaders.

3.5. The domain of outcomes

Leadership should lead to achieving specific goals, and the substantive scope of these goals is illustrated by the domain of outcomes (Man-go, 2018). Eco-centric leadership means taking action beyond expected levels of environmental performance (Al-Amin et al., 2021; Hasan

et al., 2024). Therefore, eco-centric leadership is most consistent with sustainability leadership in this domain. In other words, an eco-centric leader demonstrates an attitude of responsibility for achieving environmental, economic, and social sustainability goals and, like an ethical leader, values the company's sustainable relationships with stakeholders, including the broader community (Ren et al., 2020), whose well-being depends primarily on the state of the environment.
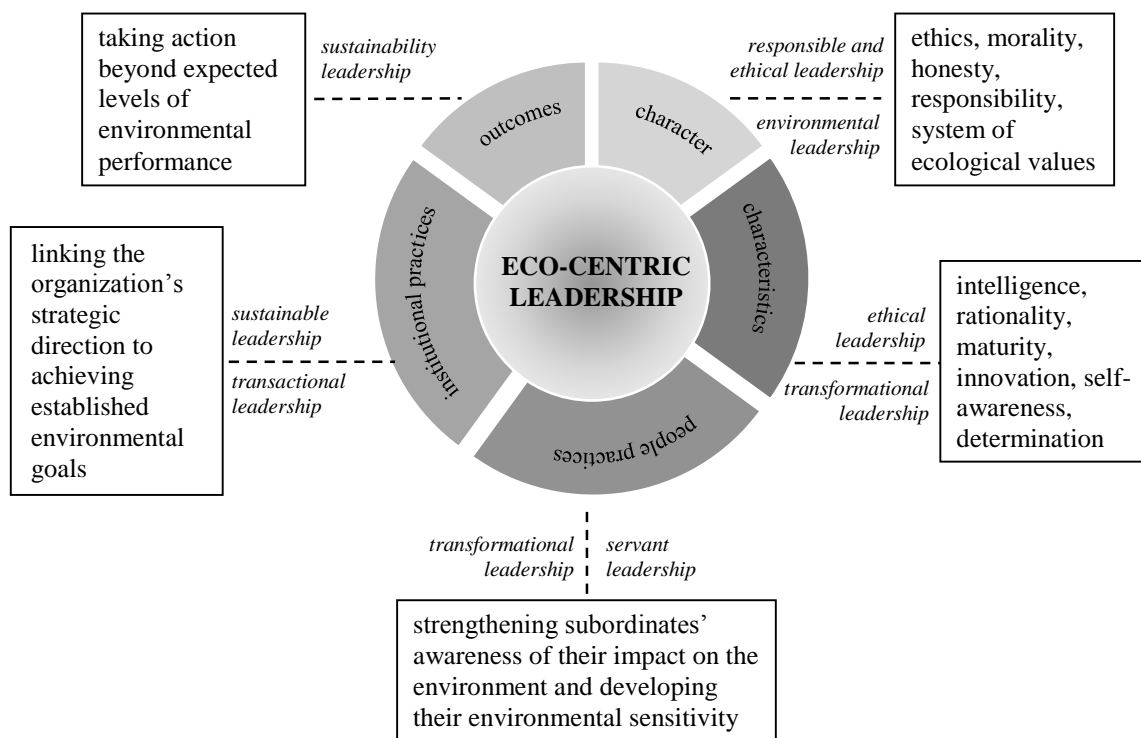

Figure 1. Eco-centric leadership – the theoretical framework.

The theoretical approach to eco-centric leadership presented in Figure 1 indicates the elements linking this new and still developing research concept to other leadership models described in the literature. The question arises, however, what then distinguishes this leadership style? First, an eco-centric leader is characterized by an innate inclination to take pro-environmental actions, treating the environment and the planet's well-being as a priority (Biswas et al., 2022; Hasan et al., 2024). In other words, such a leader, recognizing the intrinsic value of nature, shows respect for it in every dimension of the actions taken, not only seeing it as a business opportunity but also as a way to save the world. Secondly, the eco-centric attitudes of CEOs are a source of motivation and inspiration. They are vital in building leaders' relationships with subordinates (who, guided by a sense of reciprocity, will voluntarily engage in ecological activities). Highlighting the profound impact of eco-centric leadership on subordinates' attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors, the literature shows that eco-centric leadership promotes employees' voluntary green behavior (Al-Amin et al., 2021; Zafar et al., 2023) and is a crucial catalyst for sharing green knowledge within the organization (Hasan et al., 2024).

4. Conclusion

Global changes are significantly changing the way companies conduct business. The result is not only environmental and social pressures faced by CEOs but also growing normative pressures that call for a rethinking of the role of leadership in undertaking effective environmental initiatives.

The paper aimed to develop a theoretical conceptualization of eco-centric leadership, which is a new and growing research direction in management theory. As shown in the paper, this leadership style implies a business paradigm shift towards achieving harmony and balance between human activity and the natural world. Crucial in this context is the realization that companies will never achieve complete independence from the environment and, thus, sooner or later, will be forced to incorporate the ecological imperative into every dimension of their activities.

The paper reinforces the research arguments that eco-centric leadership, as a distinct leadership style, is of critical theoretical importance in undertaking environmental activities by companies (Al-Amin et al., 2021; Biswas et al., 2022; Zafar et al., 2023; Hasan et al., 2024). Moreover, by including domains representing character, characteristics, people practices, institutional practices, and outcomes the paper provides a more comprehensive understanding of the eco-centric leadership construct, not only fitting into the current research area but also enriching the theoretical domain of leadership research in the context of the long-term role played by companies in shaping the future of our planet.

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