

THE EXAMINING THE STATE OF THREE-DIMENSIONAL BENEVOLENT LEADERSHIP IN POLAND

Dorota GREGO-PLANER^{1*}, Monika CHODOREK², Monika MAKSIM³

¹ Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń; dgp@umk.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-7569-1526

² WSB University in Toruń; monika.chodorek@torun.merito.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-1956-0003

³ Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń; mouso@umk.pl, ORCID:0000-0003-2238-1089

* Correspondence author

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to identify and assess the level of benevolent leadership in Poland.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected from 187 companies in Poland. Due to the multi-informant approach, data were obtained from 861 individuals who served as informants in the field study. Benevolent Leadership was assessed using the Karakas and Sarigolu scale. We adapted this scale to Polish conditions. After formal evaluation, the collected data were subjected to statistical analysis, including the use of descriptive statistics, U Mann-Whitney test and ANOVA Kruskal-Wallis test.

Findings: The analysis of the research results revealed that the level of three-dimensional benevolent leadership in the surveyed companies is satisfactory. Respondents value leaders' social engagement the most. Another significant characteristic of benevolent leadership in Polish companies is leaders' ethical sensitivity. The spiritual dimension of leadership was rated the lowest. Employees' demographic variables do not significantly influence the perception of benevolent leadership. However, the characteristics of the enterprise itself are important—higher scores for the construct were observed in family-owned businesses and smaller enterprises.

Research limitations/implications: The data were collected from a single source by conducting surveys among companies. The cross-sectional nature of the research may therefore constitute a limitation, so it is worth considering a longitudinal research project that might capture changes in such constructs as benevolent leadership over time. The results may also be difficult to generalize because the research was conducted within a single culture. This highlights potential future directions of research in this area that would take other contexts into account.

Practical implications: The conducted research shows that subordinates highly value leaders' social engagement. Moral values of supervisors are also crucial. The results confirm that morality and ethics are important in business practice. Organizations should therefore invest in the development of leaders who are guided by values and ethics. Training programs, coaching, or mentoring can sensitize leaders to social and ethical issues, helping to foster responsible attitudes. Value-based leadership is appreciated by employees and can contribute to organizational effectiveness.

Originality/value: Our research shows that leaders' social engagement and moral values hold great significance for subordinates. This sheds new light on the importance of ethics in leadership. Our findings enrich the literature on value-based leadership.

Keywords: Benevolent Leadership, Value-based Leadership, Enterprises.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Antwi et al. (2019) note that workplace challenges have become more complex than ever before. As a result, leadership models previously effective, focused on competition and hierarchy, no longer meet the needs of contemporary organizations. These models are ill-equipped to address the global complexity, rapid pace of change, and intricate demands of today's realities. A transformation in leadership is essential—shifting from competition to collaboration, from an exclusive focus on financial outcomes to including social and environmental results, and from managing through fear to fostering trust and empowering employees. Modern leadership should balance economic interests, employee well-being, and social responsibility. As Mintzberg (2006) argues, it is also crucial for leaders to move away from materialistic motivations toward pro-social goals. New challenges call for leadership that is courageous, value-driven, and impartial. Leadership must not only embody ethics and morality in the workplace but also extend to social responsibility, addressing the needs not only of organizational members but also of its broader stakeholders (Freire, Gonçalves, 2021; Ghosh, 2015).

To date, the literature has widely embraced concepts of value-based leadership, such as ethical, authentic, servant, responsible, and charismatic leadership. While acknowledging their significant importance, it is important to note that there remains a lack of research on value-driven yet interdisciplinary leadership. Such leadership should encompass not only ethics but also other aforementioned norms and patterns of leader behavior (Shi, Ye, 2016; Thakur, Sharma, 2019).

The answer to this challenge could be *Benevolent Leadership (BL)*, proposed by Karakas and Sarigollu (2012). This leadership style is conceptualized as a process of creating positive change in organizations through ethical decision-making, creating a sense of purpose, fostering hope, developing the courage to take meaningful actions, and having a positive impact on the larger community. Benevolent leadership is rooted in deep moral values, honesty, and care for the common good, rather than solely focusing on personal interests. Its goal is to pursue the common good, based on the needs of the entire community.

As Ivanova (2018) writes, leadership plays a crucial role in shaping employee behavior patterns. Existing global studies in this area indicate that value-based leadership has a positive impact on many desirable behaviors and attitudes of subordinates (Kose, Metin, 2018; Lee

et al., 2018; Mustofa, Muafi, 2021; Nahum-Shani, Somech, 2011; Zehir et al., 2014). However, the discussions in this field have taken a rather narrow cognitive perspective. They most often focused on just one leadership style that spreads values, but only within the organization, neglecting its external environment (Cavazotte et al., 2013; Fang et al., 2009; Greenleaf and Spears, 2002; Mustofa, Muafi, 2021; Rehman, Afsar, 2012). It is therefore important to fill this gap and focus on multidimensional benevolent leadership.

The aim of this article is to identify and assess the level of benevolent leadership in Poland. The authors sought to answer the following questions:

- Which dimension of benevolent leadership is manifested at the highest level?
- Are there differences in the perception of benevolent leadership depending on the characteristics of the subjects being studied?

The article is divided into several parts. First, we present a description of value-based leadership concepts that underpin benevolent leadership. We then characterize authentic, ethical, servant, and spiritual leadership. Next, we introduce the benevolent leadership model, followed by an outline of how this phenomenon is understood in the context of Polish cultural conditions. The next part of the article focuses on describing the research sample and the methodology, after which we present the results, discussion, and final conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Moral Concepts of Leadership in the Context of Benevolent Leadership

Karakas and Sarigollu (2012) began their work on the concept of benevolent leadership by conducting a multidisciplinary literature review to identify other theories regarding ways in which leaders initiate the common good. Inductive analyses allowed them to identify four key research streams in this area – *morality, spirituality, positivity, and community*. As the authors assumed, these four paradigms relate to the creation of the common good within organizations. They can be used to create, lead, and sustain positive changes. "Common good" here refers to the overall conditions, shared benefits, or positive outcomes for all members of the organization and its immediate environment. Referring to the above-mentioned research streams, Karakas and Sarigollu (2013) concluded that benevolent leadership particularly stems from leadership concepts such as **authentic, ethical, servant, and spiritual leadership**.

The original concept of authenticity in leadership was introduced to the literature in the 1960s by Rome and Rome (1967), who described it as a function within the organizational hierarchy. However, the operationalization of the concept of **authentic leadership** was presented only later by Henderson and Hoy (1983), distinguishing between "authentic and inauthentic" leadership. Authentic leadership can be understood as a synergistic combination

of self-awareness, sensitivity to the needs of others, creativity, honesty, and transparency in relation to oneself and others (Avolio *et al.*, 2009). It is believed that authentic leaders have the moral ability to take responsibility for their own actions and the actions of their followers (Shapira-Lishchinsky and Levy-Gazenfrantz, 2015).

Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) presented the concept of authentic leadership in an interesting and clear way. The authors argued that this construct consists of four dimensions: self-awareness, openness to feedback, transparency, and morality (ethical behaviors). The key goal of authentic leadership is to achieve good and long-lasting organizational outcomes. In the early 21st century, global research focused on the connection between authentic leadership and employee attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. It was found that this type of leadership has a positive impact on employee effectiveness, creativity, and emotional engagement at the team level (Borgersen *et al.*, 2014; Rego *et al.*, 2013). Hmieleski *et al.* (2012) research also showed that authentic leadership positively influences the performance of the entire organization.

Another concept of leadership based on moral values is ***ethical leadership***. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005, p. 120) defined it 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*. The enduring interest in ethical leadership stems primarily from values such as honesty and credibility, which are integral elements of it. Ethical leadership focuses on the moral aspect and does not treat ethics merely as an additional activity. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) described it as encompassing both the traits (being a moral person) and the behaviors of the leader (moral manager). According to them, ethical leadership manifests through honesty, social responsibility, fairness, and concern for the consequences of decisions. Ethical leadership is also evident in actions that promote ethics in the workplace, with the moral stance of the manager translating into the support of ethical behaviors among employees (Mostafa, 2018). Ethical leaders are respectful, credible, and fair; they encourage employees to express their opinions openly and make decisions that are fair to the team (Chughtai *et al.*, 2015).

This style of leadership is associated with responsibility and goodwill toward employees, the community, and even competitors, regardless of the circumstances (Tutar *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, ethical leadership not only reduces the occurrence of negative phenomena in the workplace but also supports positive aspects, such as job satisfaction (Neubert *et al.*, 2009).

Servant Leadership is another concept that is related to benevolent leadership. An increasing number of organizations are striving for a model in which every employee thinks and acts like a leader. The ability for self-leadership is one of the core assumptions of servant leadership. Servant leadership is considered an important area of research due to the potential success it can bring to organizations (Mcquade *et al.*, 2021). Special attention to this concept was given by Greenleaf, who, although he never directly defined servant leadership, believed its goal was to make followers wiser, freer, more autonomous (Greenleaf, 1977). Furthermore,

the same author (1998, p. 4) argued that the *servant-leader is primarily a servant [...] Everything begins with a natural feeling of wanting to serve, and only later does the conscious choice lead to the aspiration to lead*. A servant leader places the needs of their employees first, before their own interests. As Spears (2004) pointed out, such a leader cares for their "followers" and believes that the main goal of an organization is to have a positive impact on the lives of those associated with it. Hoch et al. (2018) emphasize that servant leadership aims to achieve long-term organizational goals by supporting the development and well-being of employees. Research conducted by Liden et al. (2014) showed that this leadership style increases employee engagement, promotes prosocial behaviors, and improves effectiveness. Additionally, it contributes to higher employee satisfaction, which leads to lower turnover rates and greater trust in the organization (Jones, 2012).

The concept of **spiritual leadership** gained recognition in the literature in the 1990s when it was noted that spiritual aspects could also be significant in the context of organizational management. An important step in the development of this idea was Fairholm's 1996 article, which treated organizations as structures with a spiritual dimension. Fairholm argued that since people spend a significant portion of their lives at work, it is unreasonable to expect them to separate their spiritual identity from their professional one (Fairholm, 1996). Spirituality manifests both in rational, objective actions and in the personal sphere, guided by moral values and emotions. In simple terms, this means that professional and spiritual commitments can be pursued simultaneously (Pandey et al., 2008). Fry et al. (2005, p. 836) defined spiritual leadership as *comprising values, attitudes and behaviours required to intrinsically motivate one's self and others in order to have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership – i.e., they experience meaning in their lives, have a sense of making a difference, and feel understood and appreciated*. Fry (2003) in discussing spiritual survival, emphasized the importance of spiritual values in organizations. Spiritual leadership is considered key in meeting the fundamental needs of spiritual and moral well-being for both leaders and their followers by fostering a sense of belonging, as well as shaping vision and value alignment at the individual, team, and organizational levels. The source of spiritual leadership lies in the pursuit of a deeper sense of life and action beyond one's self-interest. Although it is the least popular concept among the four discussed, it is significantly recognized in countries of the Far East. Nonetheless, as a values-based model, it can serve as the foundation for modern management concepts that focus on morality.

2.2. Benevolent Leadership

Despite the fact that all of the aforementioned leadership concepts addressed the issue of positive change in organizations, none of them went far in explaining the attitudes and behaviors of leaders in terms of their kindness and willingness to contribute to the surrounding world.

It was only Karakas, and Sarigollu (2012), who took on the task of defining the role of leaders in initiating positive changes in organizations and their environment. These researchers concluded that visible results can only be achieved through an eclectic combination of various disciplines within a broader leadership context. As a result, they developed a conceptual model of Benevolent Leadership (BL), which was published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* in 2012 and has since become the subject of numerous scientific analyses. Karakas and Sarigollu (2012) described this model as a process of supporting and implementing positive changes in organizations to achieve visible benefits for the common good.

Benevolent leadership consists of four distinct but interconnected dimensions derived from the previously mentioned leadership concepts. The Benevolent Leadership model thus includes the following dimensions: **ethical sensitivity, spiritual depth, positive engagement, and social responsiveness.**

Ethical sensitivity refers to a leader's ability to engage in moral reflection and assess what is right and wrong in a professional context. This is a key aspect, especially in today's world, where we face issues such as corporate scandals, corruption, unethical behavior, and an unprecedented decline in moral values and character. Karakas and Sarigollu (2012) noted that ethical sensitivity encompasses not only a leader's approach to morality and making decisions in line with ethical principles but also their own moral behaviors and actions. Therefore, it can be said that ethical sensitivity is one of the most important traits of a leader in the context of moral leadership research.

When assessing a leader's level of ethical sensitivity, consideration is given to their attitude towards moral principles and ethical standards, keeping promises and commitments, as well as analyzing the ethical consequences of decisions made. It is also important to evaluate whether the leader adheres to high ethical standards, takes responsibility for their mistakes, stands up for what is right, acts in accordance with their values and beliefs, and serves as a model of integrity and honesty for others. The most important manifestations of ethical sensitivity (Karakas and Sarigollu, 2013) include responsibility and fairness, respect for and protection of the rights of employees, consumers, and employers, making decisions consistent with ethical principles, fair actions, awareness of personal values, adherence to rules and regulations, promoting moral values in the workplace, and a heightened sense of ethical responsibility.

The next dimension of benevolent leadership is **spiritual depth**. Karakas (2009) defines it as the leader's pursuit of finding meaning and purpose in their work. In this context, emotional engagement is crucial – putting one's "heart and soul" into the tasks performed, as well as caring for emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. A leader who operates within this dimension shows empathy, care, and sensitivity, treating the organization as a whole and seeking deeper meaning both in their own work and in the work of their colleagues (Karakas and Sarigollu, 2012). Such a leader strives to support their subordinates, act authentically, be understanding of difficulties, and consciously seek a meaningful mission in their work. They recognize the ethical consequences of the decisions they make and are characterized by empathy and sensitivity toward colleagues and other stakeholders.

Positive engagement, the third dimension of benevolent leadership, refers to initiating valuable changes in the organization by inspiring employees and instilling in them hope and courage. Karakas and Sarigollu (2012) define this engagement as an approach based on building positive transformation, which motivates others to act by showing them a shared vision of improvements. When subordinates recognize this engagement in their leader, they also become more involved and support their colleagues. At this level of leadership, it involves skillfully reducing resistance to change, leading and inspiring the team, managing negative emotions, and shaping a shared vision of a positive future for the organization. A high level of this engagement in a leader is manifested in their passion for change, ability to inspire courage in colleagues, willingness to take on challenges, and openness to new ideas and innovations.

Finally, the last dimension of benevolent leadership—**social responsiveness**—relates to the concept of corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship. As Maak (2016) notes, modern leaders operate in a stakeholder society, which requires them to go beyond the traditional role of a leader and act as a coordinator in relationships with various stakeholder groups. In practice, this means engaging in areas such as human rights, responsible marketing, sustainable development, fair trade, local economy, and environmental protection. This dimension reflects the civic attitude of the organization and concern for future generations. It emphasizes the leader's role in creating value for all stakeholders, including the global community. In practice, this takes the form of supporting socially responsible projects, participating in charitable actions, and building lasting relationships with stakeholders. These four dimensions of benevolent leadership together assess its level within the organization. Benevolent leaders must take into account moral, spiritual, transformational, and social issues when making decisions.

So what exactly is benevolent leadership? Karakas (2009, p. 48) defined it '*as the process of creating a virtuous cycle of encouraging, initiating, and implementing positive change in organizations through: a) ethical decision making and moral actions, b) developing spiritual awareness and creating a sense of meaning, c) inspiring hope and fostering courage for positive action, and d) leaving a legacy and positive impact for the larger community*'. Benevolent leaders are those who bring about real, lasting benefits for the common good. The central value here is the common good, and the result of these leaders' actions is a positive impact that is felt not only by individuals but also by a broad range of stakeholders. Such changes often begin with improving employees' well-being, values, and beliefs, as well as implementing innovations that lead to better working conditions. The common good also includes a good atmosphere, trust, and positive relationships within the organization. Benevolent leaders go beyond the organization, caring for the local community and diverse stakeholders, for example, by engaging in social innovation, participating in charitable activities, caring for the environment, or getting involved in social initiatives. Such leaders are an example of authentic action that benefits both the organization and its environment. Benevolent leaders inspire, motivate, and are characterized by a strong sense of social responsibility, ethics, and morality.

They are open to innovation – especially social innovation – set positive behavioral examples, create a vision for development, and believe in the achievement of their goals. Through their full commitment and emotional dedication to their work, they set an example for their colleagues, inspiring them to find meaning in what they do. All these qualities support the regular implementation of positive changes within the organization and contribute to the development of its community. Thanks to benevolent leadership, employees feel united, work together towards common goals, embrace change, and know that they are treated fairly. Clients and suppliers appreciate working with an ethical organization, and the surrounding community recognizes the leader's responsible, charitable actions. These examples clearly illustrate the positive impact that benevolent leadership can bring.

Benevolent leadership can therefore be viewed as a modern style that helps implement positive changes in 21st-century organizations. It serves as a behavioral model for leaders, combining ethical sensitivity, honesty, and self-awareness with ethical leadership, positive engagement with authentic leadership, spiritual depth, integrity, and hope with spiritual leadership. It also includes social responsibility and wisdom, which are common with servant leadership. A holistic view of these four dimensions allows leaders to gain a broad perspective on actions and effectively contribute to the common good.

These four streams – ethical sensitivity, spiritual depth, positive engagement, and social responsiveness – are the core traits of a benevolent leader. This model differs from other valuable leadership models by focusing primarily on creating positive change, especially in terms of human values (Luu, 2019). It balances the ethical, transformational, and social concerns of leaders and provides guidance on how to create understanding-based, ‘human’ organizations. Table 1 presents the attributes of a benevolent leader compared to other value-based models. These attributes include ethical sensitivity, spirituality, calling, self-awareness, life wisdom, social responsibility, engagement, serving others, building hope, and integration. While each of these attributes is part of one of the leadership models, only benevolent leadership focuses on all of them simultaneously.

Table 1.

The attributes of a benevolent leader compared to other value-based models

Attributes of a values-based leader	Ethical Leadership	Spiritual Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Servant Leadership	Benevolent Leadership
Ethical Sensitivity	+				+
Spirituality		+			+
Calling		+		+	+
Self-awareness	+	+	+		+
Life Wisdom		+		+	+
Social Responsibility	+			+	+
Positive Engagement			+		+
Serving Others				+	+
Building Hope		+	+		+
Integrating	+	+	+	+	+

Source: Own elaboration based on (Karakas, Sarigollu, 2013).

In summary, the model of benevolent leadership is based on the synthesis and integration of all four value-based leadership theories. It incorporates key values from ethical, spiritual, authentic, and servant leadership. Its focus is on creating benefits, actions, and outcomes for the common good. The emphasis on the common good is critical here, as the very essence of benevolent leadership is centered around creating positive changes or engaging in activities that benefit the broader community.

2.3. Benevolent Leadership in Poland

The concept of benevolent leadership presented by Karakas (2009) was developed based on the results of an extensive literature review, followed by empirical research. It is particularly noteworthy that after the conceptualization and operationalization of this concept, the author, together with his collaborator Sarigollu (2012), subjected the measurement scale to a multi-stage validation process. Given the possibility of replicating the research in a new empirical context, the aforementioned scale was chosen to measure benevolent leadership in Polish enterprises. However, the Polish studies focused on testing benevolent leadership from the employees' perspective.

To date, all research on benevolent leadership has relied on self-assessment—leaders evaluating their own level of benevolence. In this study, the focus was shifted to testing benevolent leadership from the perspective of employees (subordinates). It was the employees who assessed the benevolence of their leader. The rationale for adopting this approach was a belief shared by a significant group of researchers, which posits that when individuals evaluate themselves or their performance, they are likely to rely on internal thoughts, feelings, and personal traits (Jaramillo *et al.*, 2005). A meaningful and objective assessment of a leader's benevolence can, therefore, be obtained from their subordinates. This approach to evaluating leaders has been used by many researchers, including Mostafa (2018); Zhang & Yao (2019) and Engelbrecht *et al.* (2017). Thus, this study represents a novel approach to researching the phenomenon, incorporating the perspective of employees and their evaluation of the leader's benevolence.

In summary, the approach to measuring benevolent leadership was based on a replication study with an extended scope, as both the time and the cognitive context (country and group of informants) differed from the original research. The replication included not only the verification but also the adaptation of the original scale.

Originally, the construct's pioneers assumed that benevolent leadership consists of the four dimensions mentioned above: ethical sensitivity, spiritual depth, positive engagement, and social responsiveness. Each of these dimensions is measured using 10 indicators, making the measurement tool consist of 40 statements (10 for each dimension). This same measure was applied in the present study. Due to the new research context, after conducting the main study, an explorative factor analysis (EFA) was performed.

However, the number and structure of dimensions did not fully align with the original solution proposed by Karakas and Sarigollu. It was found that, in the Polish context, a three-factor solution was more appropriate.

The obtained results, however, did not allow for adopting all the same labels as in the original study. From the original framework, the dimensions of *ethical sensitivity* and *spiritual depth* were retained, as they were loaded exclusively by the indicators previously associated with these dimensions. The third dimension, however, was assigned a different label, encompassing elements from both the original dimensions of *positive engagement* and *social responsiveness*.

Thus, considering the content of the questions representing the specific measurement indicators for the third dimension of benevolent leadership, the label *social engagement* was proposed.

In summary, benevolent leadership in the Polish research context is a multidimensional phenomenon comprising the following dimensions:

- 1) **Ethical Sensitivity** – This pertains to the leader’s moral domain, specifically their approach to ethical decision-making and fulfilling commitments. This dimension of benevolent leadership also emphasizes fair treatment of employees and attentiveness to the moral conduct of both the leader and their subordinates.
- 2) **Spiritual Depth** – This involves seeking deeper meaning in one’s work. This dimension reflects empathy and patience. In this context, benevolent leadership also encompasses the pursuit of purpose and deeper fulfillment in the professional careers of both the leader and their employees.
- 3) **Social Engagement** – This pertains to the leader’s behaviors aimed at motivating not only themselves but also their subordinates to achieve positive outcomes. This dimension also refers to the leader’s social responsibility and their impact on the lives of others.

The measurement indicators included in the final, three-dimensional approach to benevolent leadership are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Final Measurement Indicators of the Three-Dimensional Benevolent Leadership Model

Dimension	Measurement indicators
Ethical Sensitivity (ES)	My supervisor reflects on ethical consequences of decision
	My supervisor takes a moral stand
	My supervisor takes ethical rules seriously
	My supervisor acts in accordance with ethical values and beliefs
	My supervisor is the role model of integrity and honesty
	My supervisor challenges colleagues when they depart from ethical values
Spiritual Depth (SD)	My supervisor works guided by high ethical standards
	Spirituality makes my supervisor a gentler person
	My supervisor tries to nurture spiritual growth of colleagues
	When faced with an important decision, spirituality of my supervisor plays important role
	My supervisor searches for something that makes his life feel significant and satisfying

Cont. table 2.

Social Engagement (SE)	My supervisor feels and acts like a responsible leader
	My supervisor is willing to devote time and energy to community
	My supervisor is involved in social responsibility projects
	My supervisor evaluates consequences of his managerial decisions for all stakeholders
	My supervisor gives his time and money to charitable causes
	My supervisor work makes a difference in people's lives
	My supervisor cares about the legacy for future generations
	My supervisor is hopeful about what we can accomplish together
	My supervisor beliefs in abilities to produce positive results

Source: Own elaboration.

3. Sample and measures

The study was conducted between July and November 2021, utilizing the Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAWI) technique. In this study sources of information from a single organization were differentiated, thus employing a *multi-informant approach*¹. This methodology, as highlighted by Kaufmann and Astou Saw (2014) is uncommon in management research but significantly increases the reliability and depth of the findings (De Los Reyes *et al.*, 2015). The study using a multi-informant approach examines the problem from the perspective of several relevant participants, taking into account perceptual and cognitive differences (Fang *et al.*, 2008). This is particularly important in studies that use (self-)perceptual measures (Kaufmann, Astou Saw, 2014; Ketokivi, Schroeder, 2004). This approach also mitigates potential biases from systematic measurement errors, such as social desirability, consistency motifs, and implicit theories (Podsakoff, Organ, 1986). The leaders evaluated in the study were decision-makers in companies, such as owners or managers responsible for the organization's social initiatives. To ensure credibility, evaluations were conducted by at least two direct subordinates reporting to each leader.

The study received approval from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee at Nicolaus Copernicus University (permit no. 4/2022/FT). Participants provided informed consent before participating, and they were fully informed of the study's purpose and their right to decline or withdraw at any time. Ethical standards for human research were upheld throughout, with participants' confidentiality and autonomy respected.

Data was collected from 187 companies. Due to the multi-informant approach, data were obtained from 861 individuals who served as informants in the field study and reported to benevolent leaders within their companies. The structure of the studied sample is presented in Table 3.

¹ It was assumed that data would be collected from a minimum of two to a maximum of five informants per organization.

Table 3.
The structure of the research sample

Criterion	Number	%
Company age		
>10 years	61	32,6
10+ years	126	67,4
Industry		
Production	90	48,1
Trade	64	34,2
Services	33	17,6
Company Size		
Micro (up to 9 employees)	11	5,9
Small (10–49 employees)	23	12,3
Medium (50–249 employees)	88	47,1
Large (250 or more employees)	65	34,8
Ownership (family business or not)		
Yes (family business)	49	26,2
No	138	73,8
Market scope		
Regional	9	4,8
National	115	61,5
European	48	25,7
Global (outside the EU)	15	8,0

Source: Own elaboration.

Benevolent Leadership was assessed using the Karakas and Sarigolu scale (2012). We adapted this scale to Polish conditions. BL in the Polish research context consists of dimensions such as ethical sensitivity (7 items), spiritual depth (4 items), and social engagement (9 items) – Table 2. It is important to note that in this study, the responses were provided by subordinates who assessed the level of benevolence of their direct supervisor. Therefore, instead of statements like “I feel and act like a responsible leader”, equivalent formulations such as “My supervisor acts like a responsible leader” were used. Cronbach’s α coefficient was found to be 0.790. All scales were assessed on a five-point Likert scale (“1 = strongly disagree”, “5 = strongly agree”). The survey was translated from English into Polish by two independent experts. The agreed Polish version was back-translated into English by another expert with satisfactory degree of convergence with the original.

4. Results

Starting the analysis of the level of benevolent leadership in the studied organizations, the first aspect evaluated was the ethical sensitivity of leaders, which mainly relates to their moral stance. The result for this dimension was rated at an average level of 4.01. When looking at the average values for individual indicators, the highest rating was given for the leaders' application of high ethical standards, which scored 4.27. It is worth noting that for over 95% of the study participants, the average rating of 4 or 5 exceeded 95%. The lowest result (though

still relatively high) concerned the situation in which a superior reacts when employees make decisions contrary to ethical values, with an average rating of 3.79. Detailed data is presented in Table 4.

Tabela 4.

Descriptive statistics of the measurement indicators of ethical sensitivity

Ethical Sensitivity (ES)	Average	Percentage*
My supervisor reflects on ethical consequences of decision	3,87	68,7
My supervisor takes a moral stand	4,07	78,3
My supervisor takes ethical rules seriously	4,03	73,9
My supervisor acts in accordance with ethical values and beliefs	4,08	77,7
My supervisor is the role model of integrity and honesty	3,94	73,9
My supervisor challenges colleagues when they depart from ethical values	3,79	64,3
My supervisor works guided by high ethical standards	4,27	95,2
	4,01	

* The frequency of affirmative responses (labels on the 4 and 5 scale). Due to the multi-informant approach, affirmative responses were considered those for which the average for a given organization was above 4.

Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

The **spiritual depth**, which refers to the leaders' ability to perceive a deeper meaning in their work, was assessed at an average level in the studied organizations, with a score of 3,51. Within this dimension, the highest rating (3,71) was given to the indicator regarding the leader's sensitivity when making important decisions. The lowest rating was given to the indicator reflecting the leader's search for deeper meaning and satisfaction in life, with a score of 3,31. It is worth noting that informants had difficulty providing a clear assessment of this aspect, which is reflected in the high number of responses with a rating of 3—indicating "difficult to say" according to the Likert scale. Detailed results for the indicators of this dimension are presented in table 5.

Table 5.

Descriptive statistics of the measurement indicators of spiritual depth

Spiritual Depth	Average	Percentage*
Spirituality makes my supervisor a gentler person	3,63	56,6
My supervisor tries to nurture spiritual growth of colleagues	3,41	49,3
When faced with an important decision, spirituality of my supervisor plays important role	3,71	57,2
My supervisor searches for something that makes his life feel significant and satisfying	3,31	44,3
	3,51	

* The frequency of affirmative responses (labels on the 4 and 5 scale). Due to the multi-informant approach, affirmative responses were considered those for which the average for a given organization was above 4.

Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

The third and final dimension of benevolent leadership – **social engagement** – was rated at an average level of **4,04** in the surveyed companies. The highest score was given to the indicator referring to the leader dedicating their time and energy to the broader community, which received a score of **4,31**, with over 82% of responses rated 4 or higher. On the other hand, the

aspect related to the leader's care for creating a legacy for future generations received the lowest score of **3,59**. The detailed results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6.

Descriptive statistics of the measurement indicators of social engagement

Social engagement	Average	Percentage*
My supervisor feels and acts like a responsible leader	4,19	86,6
My supervisor is willing to devote time and energy to community	4,31	82,8
My supervisor is involved in social responsibility projects	4,22	83,7
My supervisor evaluates consequences of his managerial decisions for all stakeholders	4,17	86,2
My supervisor gives his time and money to charitable causes	3,67	68,5
My supervisor work makes a difference in people's lives	4,01	75,1
My supervisor cares about the legacy for future generations	3,59	52,8
My supervisor is hopeful about what we can accomplish together	4,11	73,6
My supervisor beliefs in abilities to produce positive results	4,14	72,8
	4,04	

* The frequency of affirmative responses (labels on the 4 and 5 scale). Due to the multi-informant approach, affirmative responses were considered those for which the average for a given organization was above 4.

Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

The descriptive statistics values obtained in the conducted study for the variable of benevolent leadership and its individual dimensions are presented in Table 7. Benevolent leadership was rated at 3,85. Among the three dimensions, the highest rating was given to social engagement (4,04), followed by ethical sensitivity (4,01), and the lowest rating was given to spiritual depth (3,51).

Table 7.

Descriptive statistics for the variable of benevolent leadership and its dimensions

Variable	COD	\bar{x}	Me	D	SD	S	K
Ethical Sensitivity	ES	4,01	4,13	4,32	0,53	0,315	-0,887
Spiritual Depth	SD	3,51	3,51	3,56	0,91	0,038	-0,298
Social Engagement	SE	4,04	4,21	4,24	0,58	-0,279	-0,641
Benevolent Leadership	BL	3,85	3,81	4,88	0,42	0,308	-0,624

Explanations: \bar{x} – Mean, Me – Median, D - Mode, SD – Standard Deviation, S – Skewness, K – Kurtosis.

Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

In the next step, the perception of benevolent leadership was analyzed considering control variables such as company age (time on the market), sector, company size, ownership (family-owned or not), and market activity. This analysis revealed statistical differences in the entire construct or in one of the dimensions of benevolent leadership for three variables: company age, ownership, and company size. No differences were observed for the variables of market activity and sector. Detailed data are presented in tables 8 and 9.

Table 8.

Mann-Whitney U Test Statistics for Control Variables: Company Age and Ownership (Family Business or Not)

Specification	Benevolent Leadership (BL)	ES	SD	SE
Company Age				
Z - Mann-Whitney U test statistic	-1,205	-0,906	-0,137	-1,622
P - test probability	0,012	0,302	0,655	<,001
Ownership (family-owned or not)				
Z - Mann-Whitney U test statistic	-1,924	-3,728	-0,233	-1,923
P - test probability	0,024	<,001	0,723	0,014

Explanations: Z – Mann-Whitney U test statistic, p – test probability (p < 0,05).

Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

The analyses conducted indicated that for the control variable *company age*, differences emerged in the *social engagement* dimension as well as in the overall construct level. In both cases, higher values were observed for companies that had been operating in the market for at least ten years.

For the control variable *family ownership or not*, differences were identified in two dimensions of benevolent leadership, as well as in its overall level. In both the *ethical sensitivity* and *social engagement* dimensions, higher average values were associated with family-owned companies. Similarly, the overall level of leader benevolence was higher in these organizations.

Differences in the *ethical sensitivity* dimension were also observed for the control variable *company size* (Table 9). Interestingly, higher values were noted in smaller companies—micro and small enterprises—while the lowest values were observed in medium-sized companies with up to 250 employees.

Table 9.

Kruskal-Wallis Test Statistics for Control Variables: Market Scope, Sector, and Company Size

Variables				
	BL	ES	SD	SE
Market Scope				
χ^2	1,261	0,021	2,282	0,314
df	3	3	3	3
P	0,724	0,986	0,418	0,924
Industry				
χ^2	2,871	3,398	1,459	3,882
df	2	2	2	2
P	0,317	0,265	0,612	0,212
Company Size				
χ^2	4,815	8,223	3,817	2,282
df	3	3	3	3
P	0,123	0,014	0,366	0,412

Explanations: χ^2 – chi-square, df – degrees of freedom, p – test probability (p<0,05)

Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

In summary, the obtained results across different dimensions indicate that the variable *benevolent leadership* exhibits varying distributions of evaluations depending on three control variables. While characteristics such as the company's industry or geographical scope do not

differentiate benevolent leadership, factors such as the company's age, size, and family roots do play a significant role.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the research results showed that the level of three-dimensional benevolent leadership in the surveyed companies is satisfactory – participants rated it almost four on a five-point scale. Respondents most highly valued the social engagement of leaders, which highlights the growing importance of social responsibility and care for the environment, particularly in the 21st century. This is also important for employees, who are among the recipients of internal CSR activities (Furmańska-Marusza, Sudolska, 2017). Within this dimension, the highest ratings were given to leaders' behaviors in which they dedicate time and energy to the community, engage in social projects, and consider the impact of their decisions on all stakeholder groups. Their belief in achieving positive results and shared goals is also highly valued, as it motivates employees to emulate such actions.

An important characteristic of benevolent leadership in Polish companies is also the ethical sensitivity of leaders. Moral values are crucial for employees, as demonstrated by their appreciation for leaders who adhere to high ethical standards, act in alignment with their own values, and emphasize the importance of morality in the workplace. The research results confirm that morality and ethics in business practice are important, which is also reflected in the literature on the subject (Cameron, 2011; Pless, 2007; Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). Employees, as indicated in the presented research, value the leaders' reflection on what is good and what is bad in the workplace.

The spiritual dimension of leadership was rated the lowest, although respondents emphasized the importance of traits such as empathy and inner sensitivity. Leadership is often associated with spirituality and compassion, treating them as key values of leaders (Driver, 2007; Kernochan *et al.*, 2007), and according to McCormick (1994), spirituality and compassion express a deep connection with others. The high rating of leaders' empathy is therefore directly linked to their ability to show compassion. It can be stated that benevolent leadership is based not only on the actions of leaders but also on their personality traits.

Structural analyses led to interesting conclusions: employee demographics do not significantly impact their perception of benevolent leadership, while company characteristics do play a role. Higher ratings of leader benevolence were recorded in family-owned businesses, where employees rated both ethical sensitivity, social engagement, and the overall level of benevolence more positively. It was also noted that in the ethical dimension, leaders of smaller enterprises received higher ratings, which may result from closer relationships and more direct contact with employees.

6. Summary

The aim of the article was to identify and assess the level of benevolent leadership among the surveyed companies. The authors also sought to answer which dimension of benevolent leadership is shaped at the highest level and whether there are differences in the perception of this leadership depending on the characteristics of the surveyed entities. The conducted empirical analyses proved that the level of three-dimensional benevolent leadership can be considered high. The most significant dimension for subordinates among all the dimensions of benevolent leadership is social engagement, followed by ethical sensitivity, and the least important is spiritual depth. Employee demographic variables do not have a significant impact on the perception of benevolent leadership. However, the perception of this construct is related to the characteristics of the company itself – higher ratings of the construct were obtained in family-owned businesses and smaller enterprises.

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