SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN SPORT ORGANIZATIONS: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF RELATIONAL REFLEXIVITY

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Purpose: This study explores the role of relational reflexivity in sustainable leadership within sports management, focusing on the predominant reflexivity traits among sports management students.

Design/Methodology/approach: The research examines four key dimensions of relational reflexivity: self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, and conflict resolution. A sample of 146 sport management students completed a questionnaire assessing these dimensions, with the results analyzed using Friedman ANOVA and post hoc Wilcoxon signed-rank tests.

Findings: The acquired results revealed that conflict resolution (M = 5.86, SD = 1.20) and communication (M = 5.19, SD = 1.33) were the most prominent aspects, while self-awareness (M = 4.72, SD = 1.49) and perspective-taking (M = 4.73, SD = 1.46) received lower ratings. Post hoc analyses confirmed significant differences among dimensions, with conflict resolution rated significantly higher than self-awareness (p < .001) and perspective-taking (p = .002). These results suggest that students prioritize practical, outward-facing skills over introspective abilities, highlighting a potential gap in leadership education.

Originality/value: The study underscores the importance of integrating self-awareness and perspective-taking into leadership training programs to develop well-rounded, ethically responsive leaders. By addressing these gaps, sports management education can better prepare students to navigate the complexities of team dynamics, stakeholder relationships, and sustainable decision-making in sports organizations.

Keywords: relational reflexivity, sustainable leadership, sport management, self-awareness, perspective-taking, conflict resolution, communication.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Effective leadership in sports organizations entails harmonizing social and economic obligations. Leaders must consistently reflect on this. They should assess their relationships with stakeholders to make informed decisions that align with sustainable principles.

In sports management research, this practice of thinking, known as reflexivity, can enhance the research process and yield positive results for various interested parties. In leadership within sports organizations, understanding the repercussions of actions on stakeholders and integrating ecological and social factors into decision-making processes is crucial. Relational reflexivity involves assessing the connections between sports organizations and their stakeholders while emphasizing best practices.

In discussions about leadership, relational reflexivity is deemed essential, particularly emotional reflexivity. This trait allows leaders to adapt according to their followers' expectations (Gbaraka, Obipi, 2017). Expanding on this discourse, Warwick (2011) underscores the importance of understanding interactions in leadership studies by shifting from abstract concepts to concentrating on the intricate details of human engagements from an individuals perspective. This approach is inspired by complexity sciences and the responsive processes involved in relating to others, deepening our understanding of the continuous nature of human interactions. Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011) built upon this framework by proposing that leadership is a practice rooted in responsibility and an awareness of the dialogic and multifaceted nature of life. This viewpoint not only enhances our understanding of leadership but also emphasizes the practical significance of making leaders more cognizant of the importance of relationship dynamics and the role of everyday conversations in promoting morally accountable leadership.

Painter-Morland (2008) and Willis (2019) delve into the systemic and contextual aspects of relational leadership, shedding light on the challenges in manifesting desired leadership behaviors within complex organizational systems. Willis stresses the responsibility of members to nurture an ethically attuned environment that acknowledges how leadership is socially constructed through intricate interactions within organizations. The discussion examines how different leadership styles influence decision-making processes, as evidenced by Kayode (2014) and Cunliffe (2009), who advocate for an approach to leadership education. Binns (2008) focuses on considerations within leadership, particularly concerning gender dynamics. By exploring the dilemmas leaders face attempting to navigate relational practices amidst societal expectations favoring instrumental and masculine attributes, Binns's study offers valuable insights into the ethical challenges in contemporary leadership contexts. Leaders are encouraged to reflect on their actions and consider self-improvement, challenging traditional leadership norms for a more inclusive and morally grounded approach.

Cronen et al. (1982) distinguish reflexivity and paradox by critiquing the foundations of Russells theory of types and its practical implications. He proposes a framework that acknowledges reflexivity as a component of systems of meaning. Farrugia (2013) discusses the concept of reflexivity, drawing on Bourdieus theory of practice to link reflexivity with practice. Doucet (2007) employs the metaphor of "threads" to illustrate how knowledge evolves among researchers, participants, and the academic community. Tsekeris and Katrivesis (2008) offer a perspective on the development of reflexivity in sociology, emphasizing its role in addressing

issues related to awareness and significance while transcending binaries. Hibbert et al. (2014) and Hosking and Pluut (2010) advocate for approaches to reflexivity that stress theorizing and constructed processes, respectively. Archer (2013) defines reflexivity as the ability to introspect within social contexts, highlighting its interactive aspect. These works highlight the dynamic nature of reflexivity in inquiry, cultivating a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of its implications for knowledge and practical application.

Numerous studies have explored practices in sports management, advocating for a hands-on approach that promotes innovation in sports leadership through learning and research. This research highlights the importance of customizing advancements in the sports industry to specific contexts by examining leadership and followership. It also stresses the value of integrating real-world experiences into sports management education, research, and community engagement efforts (Damon et al., 2022). In soccer management, there is a critical need to investigate the psychological aspects of leadership. Discussions cover leadership models used in soccer management, underscoring the importance of research in sports, improved training programs, and support for soccer managers. Future studies should focus on understanding the demands and challenges faced by soccer administrators (Crust, Lawrence, 2006). The field of sports leadership is dynamic and evolving, emphasizing adaptability and responsiveness to change.

Examining how different models interact in sports management and marketing shows that the ongoing evolution in sports, driven by technology, should focus on efficient and practical strategies. These efforts aim to enhance the importance of sports and commercial roles, highlighting the nature of the industry (Malacko et al., 2019). Stakeholders influence leadership perceptions and encourage a collaborative leadership style to promote growth. Sports management research often neglects stakeholder aspects while emphasizing quantitative approaches. Stakeholders views on leadership are shaped by their experiences and connections within the field, suggesting that these interactions impact leadership. Embracing a collaborative leadership approach can foster change (Kihl et al., 2010).

The social construction of leadership significantly impacts sports management education and practical application. This research underscores traits of sports managers such as interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. It also emphasizes the need to explore evaluating sports managers effectiveness in peer relationships. This study critiques the focus on process management over people management in sports administration and advocates for a constructionist approach to leadership within this field. This viewpoint addresses limitations in existing leadership studies within sports management while reinvigorating understanding by spotlighting construction (Billsberry et al., 2018).

Today, in sports organizations, leadership skills such as intelligence and data-driven decision-making are essential for overcoming challenges. A study explores leadership practices within the sports industry, emphasizing the importance of intelligent, informed decision-making and effective problem-solving in shaping an organizations values and culture (Scott,

2014). Improving leadership and management in sports demands strategic development, clear role definitions, and personal growth. The research identifies five elements for leaders, managers, and sports entities to enhance their performance in elite sports management: establishing a structured method to clearly understand roles, improving contextual awareness, refining personal skills, and fostering relationships to create a supportive environment with adequate resources (Arnold et al., 2012).

This study explores the role of relational reflexivity in leadership development, particularly within the context of sports management. Relational reflexivity enables leaders to critically evaluate their stakeholder interactions critically, fostering effective decision-making and sustainable leadership practices. The research builds on established frameworks, including Edwards (1999) work on sustainable leadership and Schneiders (2014) theories on reflexivity, to investigate the dominant reflexivity traits among sport management students. Specifically, the study examines four key dimensions of relational reflexivity: self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, and conflict resolution. Understanding which aspects of reflexivity are most prominent can provide valuable insights for designing leadership education and training programs. Relational reflexivity is particularly critical in sport management, where leaders must navigate complex interpersonal dynamics and team-based environments. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which type of reflexivity is most dominant among sport management students: self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, or conflict resolution?
2. Which specific element within these categories is rated the highest?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The study included 146 sports management students from various academic institutions. The sample consisted of 87 males (59.6%) and 59 females (40.4%), with an average age of 24.3 years (SD = 3.1). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 30 and were enrolled in sports management programs. All participants had prior experience in team-based settings, either in amateur or organized sports.

2.2. Procedure

The study employed a questionnaire (see appendix) grounded in established theories of relational reflexivity. The four core dimensions of reflexivity were operationalized as follows:

1. Self-Awareness: Based on Golemans (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory, which emphasizes the role of self-awareness in leadership effectiveness.

2. Perspective-Taking: Rooted in the Theory of Mind (Premack, Woodruff, 1978) and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), highlighting the importance of understanding others viewpoints.

3. Communication: Barnlunds (1970) Transactional Model of Communication describes communication as a dynamic and reciprocal process.

4. Conflict Resolution: Derived from the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1974), which identifies various approaches to managing interpersonal conflicts.

Each dimension was assessed using five items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). The total relational reflexivity score ranged from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating stronger reflexivity skills. Participants completed the questionnaire online, providing data on their self-perceived reflexivity abilities.

2.3. Statistical Methods

A Friedman ANOVA test examined differences among the four reflexivity dimensions. The test yielded a statistically significant variation in participant ratings across the categories. Post hoc Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Bonferroni corrections were used to analyze pairwise differences. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for each dimension to provide further insights

3. Results

The analysis revealed significant differences among the four dimensions of relational reflexivity: self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, and conflict resolution. Conflict resolution emerged as the most dominant aspect (M = 5.86, SD = 1.20), closely followed by communication (M = 5.19, SD = 1.33). In contrast, perspective-taking (M = 4.73, SD = 1.46) and self-awareness (M = 4.72, SD = 1.49) received notably lower ratings. These findings, illustrated in Figure 1, suggest that sport management students prioritize practical, outward-facing skills such as conflict resolution and communication over introspective abilities like self-reflection and perspective-taking.

Post hoc analyses using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Bonferroni corrections confirmed these differences. Self-awareness was rated significantly lower than both communication (p = .038) and conflict resolution (p < .001), while perspective-taking was rated significantly lower than conflict resolution (p = .002). The difference between communication and conflict resolution was also highly significant (p < .001), underscoring a strong preference for effectively resolving disputes. The contrast between self-awareness and perspective-taking approached significance (p = .055), suggesting a relatively balanced perception of these two dimensions.

A closer look at individual items within each dimension provided further insights. For self-awareness, students rated "taking responsibility for mistakes" (M = 5.19, SD = 1.33) higher than "actively seeking feedback to improve management style" (M = 4.72, SD = 1.49), as shown in Figure 2. This suggests that while students value accountability, they may be less proactive in seeking feedback for self-improvement.
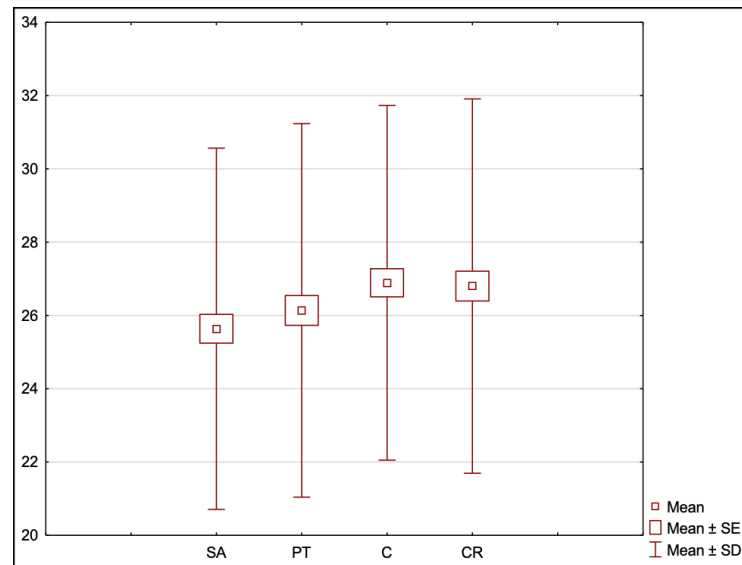

Figure 1. Mean values of Self-Awareness (SA), Perspective-Taking (PT), Communication and Conflict-Resolving (CR) in sport management students.
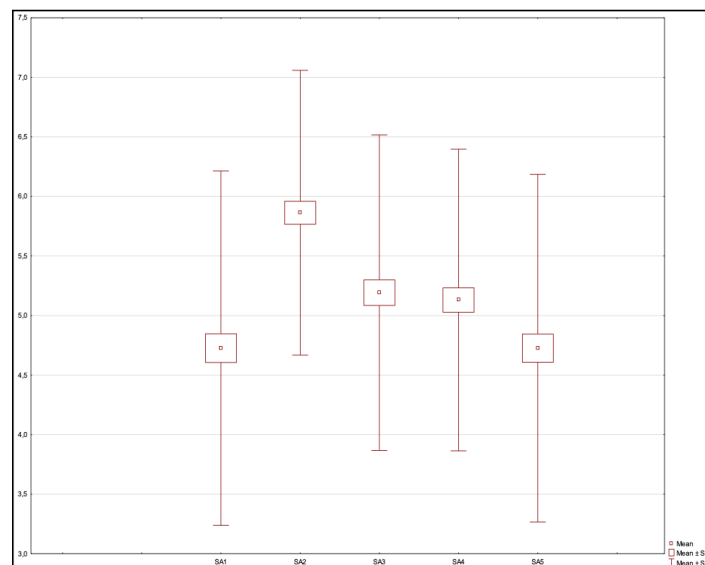

Figure 2. Mean values of Self-Awareness questions in sport management students.

In the conflict resolution dimension, skills such as "mediating disputes" (M = 5.86, SD = 1.20) and "ensuring all parties feel respected" (M = 5.56, SD = 1.16) were rated highly, as depicted in Figure 3. This reinforces the prominence of conflict resolution as a key leadership trait.

Within the communication dimension, "facilitating open and honest communication" (M = 5.51, SD = 1.25) was rated higher than "active listening during discussions" (M = 5.25, SD = 1.34), as shown in Figure 4. This indicates potential gaps in empathetic communication skills. For perspective-taking, "encouraging team members to share their views" (M = 5.39, SD = 1.22) was rated higher than "being open to changing opinions based on team insights" (M = 4.91, SD = 1.46), as illustrated in Figure 5. This suggests challenges in adapting viewpoints based on others input.
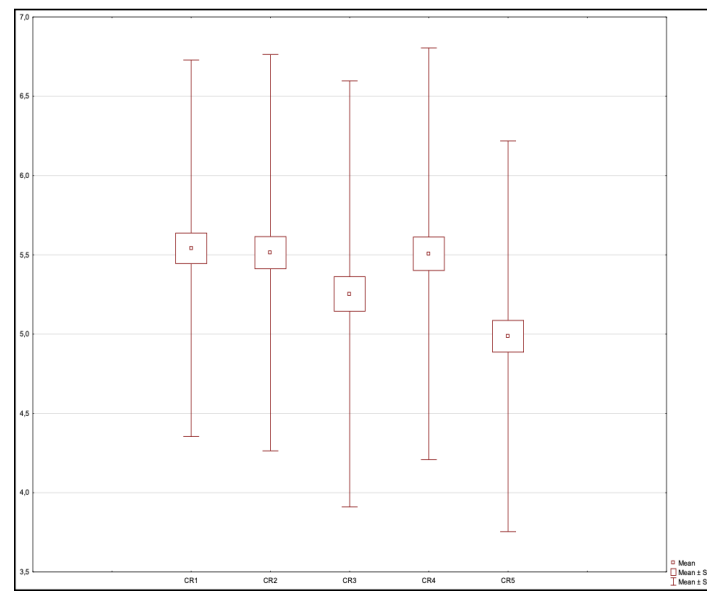
Figure 3. Mean values of Conflict-Resolution questions in sport management students.
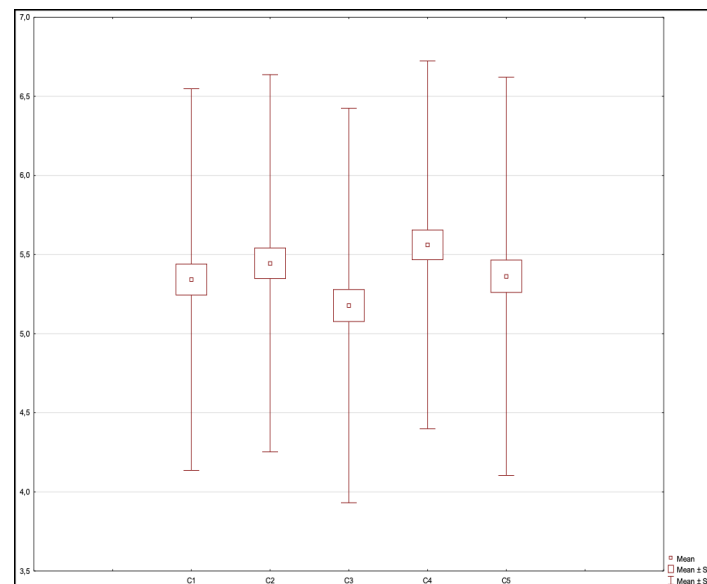
Figure 4. Mean values of communication questions in sport management students.
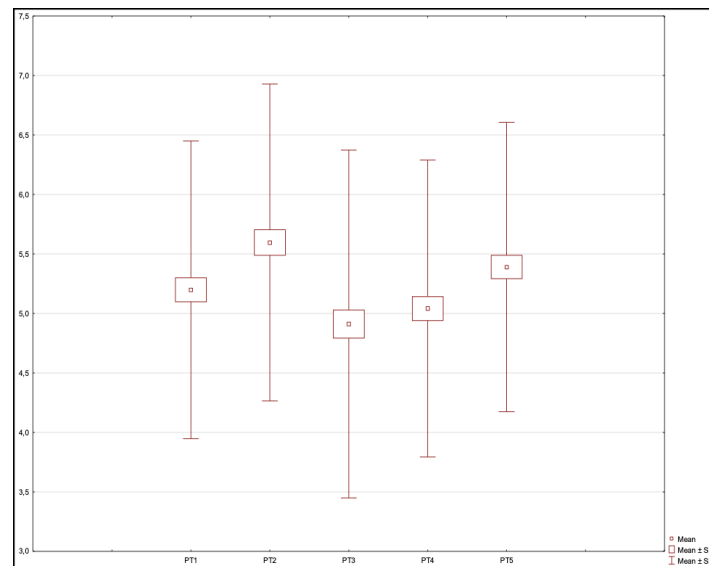
Figure 5. Mean values of Perspective-Taking questions in sport management students.

Post-hoc analyses revealed significant differences between specific items. For example, within communication, "resolving misunderstandings quickly and constructively" (M = 5.56, SD = 1.16) was rated significantly higher than "actively listening during discussions" (M = 5.25, SD = 1.34, p = .029). Similarly, within conflict resolution, "mediating conflicts in a way that strengthens team cohesion" (M = 5.86, SD = 1.20) was rated significantly higher than "encouraging a culture of respect to prevent conflicts" (M = 5.51, SD = 1.25, p = .012).

These results collectively highlight a preference for practical, action-oriented skills over introspective and empathetic abilities. While conflict resolution and communication are well-developed, self-awareness and perspective-taking require further attention in leadership training programs. The figures' visual representations underscore the need for a more balanced approach to leadership development in sports management education.

4. Discussion

The findings highlight the critical role of relational reflexivity in fostering sustainable leadership within sport management. By examining reflexivity traits among sport management students, the study underscores a crucial insight: practical, relational skills—particularly communication and conflict resolution—are strongly emphasized, while introspective capacities such as self-awareness and perspective-taking remain underdeveloped. This imbalance points to a significant gap in current leadership education, where immediate problem-solving overshadows deeper, reflective capabilities essential for sustainable and ethically informed decision-making.

The strong preference among students for conflict resolution resonates with previous research emphasizing effective leadership in high-pressure, team-oriented contexts. Sports organizations frequently demand swift conflict management and clear communication, making these outward-oriented relational competencies particularly valued. However, sustainable leadership also demands deeper introspection, a dimension highlighted by Archer (2013), who argues that relational reflexivity empowers leaders to critically evaluate their biases and understand the broader ethical implications of their actions.

Recent advancements in the relational reflexivity literature strengthen the case for a balanced integration of practical and introspective relational skills. For instance, Groulx et al. (2025) demonstrated that relational reflexivity is particularly beneficial for teams composed of members with diverse tenure levels and experience. Leaders frequently manage teams comprising experienced practitioners and newcomers in sports management contexts, mirroring this tenure diversity. Encouraging students to cultivate stronger self-awareness and perspective-taking could significantly enhance their ability to integrate diverse viewpoints, thus improving team cohesion and organizational adaptability.

Moreover, Leblanc, Harvey, and Rousseaus (2024) meta-analysis identifies psychological safety as a critical mediator enabling effective relational reflexivity. Their findings emphasize that leadership styles promoting openness, active participation, and reduced power distance enormously facilitate reflective dialogues among team members. Given the comparatively low scores observed for introspective relational skills in the current study, incorporating psychological safety training into leadership education could encourage students to reflect more deeply and openly on their interactions and decisions.

In parallel, Hadi and Chaudhary (2021) found that relational reflexivity effectively mediates the relationship between shared leadership structures and team performance, particularly under complex task conditions. Since sports management leaders often face complex and dynamic decision-making scenarios, training programs would benefit from actively fostering shared leadership practices that encourage mutual reflection, dialogue, and perspective-sharing. This could bridge the identified gap between practical skills (such as conflict resolution) and introspective capabilities (like self-awareness and perspective-taking), fostering adaptive, resilient leadership.

Yang et al. (2020) further underline that relational reflexivity significantly improves decision-making quality in diverse teams by enhancing collective information processing. Thus, a deeper engagement with relational reflexivity skills—especially perspective-taking and empathetic listening—could constructively equip sports management students to leverage diversity. The current findings reinforce the necessity for leadership education to explicitly incorporate relational reflexivity as a foundation for navigating diversity and ethical complexity in stakeholder relationships.

Additionally, relational reflexivity contributes profoundly to organizations' broader identity formation and learning process. Beech et al. (2021) highlight that identity construction and collective learning through relational reflexivity help individuals manage differences and organizational contradictions. Such identity-related competencies are critical in sports management, where leaders must continually adapt their identities and practices in response to shifting stakeholder demands and ethical challenges. Gordons (2021) insights complement this view, suggesting that continuous relational dialogue between leaders and team members—achieved through longitudinal, experiential learning methods—can significantly enrich leaders reflective capacities, facilitating more empathetic and ethically-informed decision-making.

Further supporting the integration of relational reflexivity into leadership education, Meier and Carroll (2023) conceptualize relational reflexivity as inherently communicative and interactional. They propose that leadership programs emphasize real-time, interactive reflection practices rather than solely cognitive introspection. Cunliffe (2009) aligns with this relational view, advocating reflexivity deeply embedded in lived organizational experiences. She suggests practical, experiential methods that directly link leadership theory with the complex realities encountered by leaders daily.

These theoretical insights reinforce Edwards (2005) foundational arguments for sustainable leadership, emphasizing a holistic approach balancing economic, social, and environmental responsibilities. Relational reflexivity serves as the bridge connecting practical leadership capabilities to deeper introspective awareness and ethical reflection. To address the identified educational gaps, leadership development programs in sports management must embed structured opportunities for self-reflection, empathy training, psychological safety, and interactive experiential learning. Employing pedagogical strategies such as journaling, scenario-based role-play, longitudinal reflective dialogues, and collaborative problem-solving can strengthen relational reflexivity, ultimately cultivating well-rounded leaders capable of ethically and sustainably navigating complex organizational dynamics and stakeholder expectations.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of relational reflexivity in leadership development, particularly in sports management. While students prioritize conflict resolution and communication, self-awareness, and perspective-taking must be enhanced to cultivate well-rounded leaders. Future research should explore the long-term evolution of these reflexivity skills and assess the impact of targeted training interventions. By integrating external and internal reflexivity competencies, leadership education programs can better prepare students to navigate the complexities of team management and ethical decision-making in sports organizations.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

The Relational Reflexivity Questionnaire

Self-Awareness
1. I regularly reflect on my own behaviors and their impact on my team.
2. I actively seek feedback from my team to improve my leadership style.
3. I am aware of my personal biases and work to address them in decision-making.
4. I consider how my actions are perceived by others in my team.
5. I take responsibility for my mistakes and work to correct them.

Perspective-Taking
6. I make an effort to understand my team members' points of view before making decisions.
7. I value the input and opinions of all team members equally.
8. I regularly ask for team members' perspectives on issues affecting them.
9. I am open to changing my mind based on my team's insights.
10. I encourage team members to share their views even when they differ from mine.

Communication
11. I ensure that my team feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.
12. I communicate clearly and effectively with my team.
13. I address misunderstandings within the team promptly and constructively.
14. I actively listen to my team members during discussions.
15. I facilitate open and honest communication within the team.

Conflict Resolution
16. I approach conflicts within the team with a focus on finding solutions.
17. I ensure that all parties feel respected and valued during conflict resolution.
18. I handle conflicts or disagreements among team members promptly.
19. I encourage a culture of respect and understanding to prevent conflicts.
20. I mediate conflicts in a way that strengthens team cohesion.