

PREVENTIVE-RELATIONAL AND TASK-REACTIVE METHODS OF PERSONNEL RISK MANAGEMENT: GENDER-DIFFERENTIATED PATTERNS OF SUSTAINABLE HRM PRACTICES

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to present differences in approaches to managing personnel risk revealed in a qualitative study of sustainable human resource management practices in the Polish organisational context. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns of managerial actions that differentiate approaches to anticipating, responding to, and learning in the face of human resource-related risks, with particular attention to the gender aspect.

Methodology/Research Approach: The study was based on individual in-depth interviews (IDI) conducted using a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with a documented research procedure. The study was exploratory in nature. The identified patterns are treated descriptively, as hypotheses for further quantitative verification. The empirical section is complemented by a synthetic meta-analysis of the literature, organising existing findings on the differentiation of leadership tools between women and men and their links to sustainable HRM practices and personnel risk profiles. Psychological safety and the psychological contract are used in the discussion as interpretive lenses and plausible mechanisms; they are not directly measured in the present qualitative study.

Findings: Two distinct patterns of working with personnel risk emerged from the participants' narratives. The first, preventive-relational, more often characteristic of women managers, involves early detection of soft signals through constant voice channels and individual conversations, systematic "closing" of expectations and cooperation rules, a mediatory approach to disputes, and knowledge consolidation after events. This style emphasises predictability and procedural fairness. The second, task-reactive, more frequently present in men managers' narratives, focuses on monitoring hard indicators and operational thresholds, rapid response under time pressure and uncertainty, cascading goals, and consistent enforcement of standards, with an emphasis on execution discipline and readiness to reconfigure tasks. The observed differences manifest throughout the entire risk management cycle: from identification and prioritisation, through response, to organisational learning and communication. Interpretation of the results takes into account contextual factors such as HR process maturity and the specifics of organisational tasks.

Originality/Value: The article contributes to the literature on sustainable HRM by highlighting links between gendered leadership patterns and approaches to managing personnel risk—an area still insufficiently explored in HRM research. It combines the perspective of risk management with the logic of sustainable organisational development, showing how different orientations (relational and task-focused) can influence organisational resilience and adaptive capacity. The article concludes with proposed research questions that serve as a starting point for further quantitative studies on the identified patterns.

Keywords: Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM), personnel risk, human resource management practices, managerial awareness, employee engagement, professional development, gender-differentiation.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Sustainable human resource management (SHRM) is an approach that integrates the economic goals of an organisation with concern for employee well-being and social and environmental responsibility (Ehnert, 2009; Armstrong, Taylor, 2016). Unlike traditional HRM, which focuses mainly on short-term operational efficiency, sustainable HRM takes a long-term perspective and emphasises employee health, development and engagement as key factors in organisational stability (Guest, 2017; Bombiak, 2019). In this approach, personnel risk management, understood as a set of risks related to the loss of key employees, turnover, burnout, absenteeism or a decline in motivation and productivity, takes on particular importance (Lipka, 2002; Bombiak, 2018). The implementation of a sustainable HRM strategy can reduce these risks by shaping relationships based on trust and strengthening the durability of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 2004; Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2024), which contributes to increased loyalty and reduces the likelihood of undesirable personnel phenomena (Rousseau, 2011; Johns, 2018). These relationships are discussed in the literature primarily as associations rather than as simple causal effects.

Contemporary organisations operate under technological, social and demographic pressure, which leads to an intensification of personnel risks (Castells, 2010; Nawaz, Durst, Hariharasudan, 2020). In highly dynamic sectors such as IT, a key challenge is to retain employees in the face of rapid changes in competencies (Widodo, 2023), while in high-pressure industries such as the financial sector, the risk of burnout and turnover is increasing. Sustainable HRM responds to these challenges through practices that support development, well-being, work-life balance and flexibility, which can reduce the likelihood of personnel risks materialising (Aust et al., 2020; Cox, Griffiths, 2005). The literature also points to the important role of leadership style in determining how personnel risks are identified and mitigated (Avery, Bergsteiner, 2011; Bombiak, 2019). Managers can act proactively, building relationships and early warning mechanisms, or rely on reactive measures, taken only after a problem has arisen.

At the same time, previous research suggests that gender may differentiate preferred leadership styles, as women are more likely to be relationship- and participation-oriented, while men are more likely to use a task- and directive-oriented approach (Eagly, Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Carli, 2003). These tendencies reflect average patterns identified at the group level and should not be interpreted as deterministic rules applying to individual managers. Despite numerous analyses of gender differences in leadership, there is still a gap in the literature linking these differences to the perception of personal risk in the sustainable HRM paradigm. In particular, there is a lack of qualitative research that would reveal the microfoundations of these mechanisms, explaining how gender and leadership style jointly shape prevention, response and organisational learning practices.

The aim of this article is to examine how the gender of a manager differentiates personal risk management styles in the context of sustainable HRM and what significance these styles have for prevention, response and organisational learning. The analysis is based on the results of a qualitative study conducted in Poland, which identified two dominant styles of human resource risk management: a preventive-relational style, more often declared by women, and a task-reactive style, more often declared by men. Given the exploratory nature of the research, instead of classic hypotheses, research questions were formulated, focusing on: (1) how a manager's gender may co-occur with their preferred style of human resource risk management, and (2) what implications for sustainable HRM are associated with adopting a relational or task-oriented approach.

The article consists of four main parts. The first part presents the theoretical framework, including the definition of personnel risk, its areas and the theoretical basis for gender differences in leadership styles, as well as a conceptual model. Next, the methodology and course of the qualitative study are presented. The next part contains the results in the form of characteristics of the two identified styles of personal risk management and their comparison. The article concludes with a discussion of the results, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature review and research gap

This article deliberately focuses on three theoretical perspectives: personnel risk, leadership and gender differences, as these constitute the mechanism linking individual management styles with sustainable HRM practices. In terms of sustainable human resource management (SHRM), personnel risk is the likelihood of events and decisions affecting employees that may disrupt an organisation's ability to achieve its long-term goals (Ehnert, 2009; Guest, 2017). It includes, among other things, turnover and absenteeism, overload and burnout, competence shortages,

conflicts, unethical behaviour, and breaches of the psychological contract (Lipka, 2002; Bombiak, 2018; Rousseau, 2011).

From the perspective of sustainable HRM, long-term effects such as loss of human and social capital, erosion of trust, weakening of innovation, and repetition of mistakes resulting from a lack of learning are crucial (Avery, Bergsteiner, 2011; Guest, 2017). Risk analysis requires distinguishing between three complementary levels: micro (leader-employee interactions: quality of relationships, fairness, clarity of expectations), meso (HR processes: recruitment and retention, development, evaluation, workload, well-being), macro (organisational culture and climate: ethical norms, psychological safety, participation) (Lipka, 2015; Edmondson, 1999; Aust et al., 2020). At each level, there are early warning signs – e.g. a decline in participation in 1:1 conversations and initiative (micro), an accumulation of vacancies and an increase in absenteeism (meso), a deterioration in mood survey results and an increase in complaints (macro), the systematic monitoring of which is a prerequisite for prevention (Cox, Griffiths, 2005; Bombiak, 2019). Failure to take *ex ante* action increases the likelihood of *ex post* intervention (*ad hoc* replacements, disciplinary escalations), which in turn reduces the organisation's ability to learn from incidents (Argyris, Schön, 1978; Edmondson, 1999).

Leadership sets priorities in the area of HR and filters the way risk signals are interpreted. Task-reactive and directive approaches reinforce the focus on indicators and operational continuity, while preventive-relational and participatory approaches increase sensitivity to "soft" symptoms of crisis and encourage early intervention (Avery Bergsteiner, 2011; Bombiak, 2019). In practice, personnel risk is therefore managed along a prevention-reaction continuum: at one end lies proactive detection of signals, strengthening the psychological contract and well-being, and at the other end lies intervention after the problem has materialised, with an emphasis on maintaining results (Guest, 2017; Aust et al., 2020). One of the key mechanisms discussed in the literature as linking these practices with organisational learning is psychological safety, understood as the belief of team members that reporting problems and mistakes will not result in sanctions. (Edmondson, 1999; Vera, Crossan, 2004).

Meta-analytic studies indicate that gender differences in leadership are generally systematic: women are more likely to exhibit preventive-relational and participatory styles, while men are more likely to exhibit task-reactive and directive styles (Eagly, Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Carli, 2003). These discrepancies are explained, among other things, by social role theory: women are expected to exhibit supportive behaviours, while men are expected to exhibit agency and control, which translates into habitual leadership patterns (Abele, Wojciszke, 2007). At the same time, meta-analyses in economics and behavioural psychology show a higher average propensity for risk among men, although the effect depends on the context and field (Byrnes et al., 1999; Croson, Gneezy, 2009). Consequently, in the area of HR, it can be expected that female managers will more often objectify prevention (monitoring mood and workload, building feedback channels), while male managers will objectify reaction (quick procedural

decisions after a problem occurs). Both approaches can be effective in favourable conditions, but they differ in their impact on the psychological contract and learning: a preventive-relational orientation promotes trust and open reporting of errors, while a task-reactive orientation reduces response time at the expense of the depth of causal diagnosis (Rousseau, 2011; Edmondson, 1999).

The psychological contract (informal, mutual employee-organisation expectations) modulates the effects of HR practices: its fulfilment strengthens commitment and stabilises behaviour, while its violation results in a decline in trust, withdrawal and turnover, escalating personnel risk (Rousseau, 2004, 2011). Psychological safety acts as a catalyst for learning after incidents, allowing a shift from ad hoc responses to systemic changes in HR processes (Edmondson, 1999; Argyris, Schön, 1978; Vera, Crossan, 2004). In this view, leadership style is a "vehicle" for practices that either uphold the contract and create conditions for learning or undermine them. Based on the above findings, we propose a model combining the individual level (leader's gender), personal risk management style, and consequences at the level of HR processes and the organisation. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

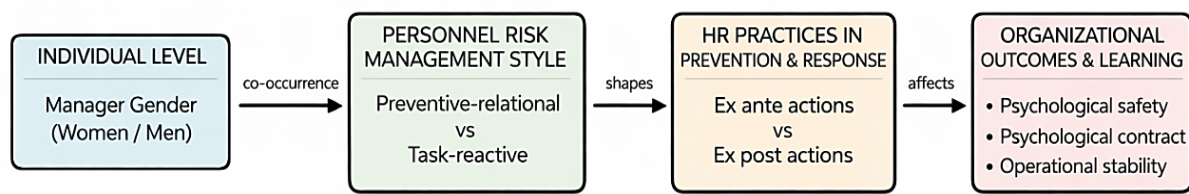


Figure 1. Conceptual model of personal risk management in HRM.

Source: Own work.

The model proposes the following sequence as a conceptual representation of relationships suggested in prior research and explored qualitatively in this study. The model assumes a directional relationship, which in the study is interpreted as co-occurrence rather than determinism. We do not test causality in the study; we describe co-occurrence. Style functions here as an intermediary mechanism that translates individual differences (averaged gender tendencies in leadership and risk preferences) into specific personal risk management practices. In turn, the psychological contract and psychological safety are mechanisms of transition between practices and organisational outcomes, determining whether incidents lead to learning and prevention of recurrence or to cyclical "firefighting" (Rousseau, 2011; Edmondson, 1999; Vera, Crossan, 2004). Finally, the strength of the links may be influenced by contextual moderators: sector, organisation size and leadership tenure (Aust et al., 2020; Bombiak, 2019). The model is instrumental in nature: it serves to interpret qualitative results and derive hypotheses for further quantitative analysis. Prior research has documented gender-differentiated leadership tendencies and has separately discussed personnel risk and sustainable HRM. However, the intersection between gendered leadership patterns and the micro-level practices through which managers identify, respond to, and learn from personnel risks within a sustainable HRM perspective remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by

(1) identifying two qualitatively distinct styles of personnel risk management and (2) organizing their practices along the personnel risk cycle, while using the proposed conceptual model to derive propositions for further quantitative verification.

3. Methods

The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature, and its aim was to gain a deeper understanding of how managers operating in various sectors of the economy interpret and practise personal risk management. Analytic stance and interpretive lenses. The empirical claims in this paper are limited to patterns identified in managers' narratives through thematic analysis and illustrated with representative quotations. References to psychological safety and the psychological contract are introduced to interpret how the identified practices may relate to voice, trust, and learning processes in organizations. Because these constructs were not directly measured, they are treated as interpretive explanations and propositions for future quantitative testing rather than as empirically verified causal mechanisms. The project was based on an interpretative paradigm, assuming that management style, ways of responding to personnel risks and understanding of sustainable HRM are constructed through managers' daily experiences and perceptions. The choice of a qualitative research strategy was justified by the early stage of development of the issue and the need to reconstruct the patterns of action necessary for the subsequent operationalisation of the construct of personal risk management styles. It should be emphasised that the intention of the study was not to generalise the results statistically to the population of managers (which is the domain of quantitative research), but to generalise analytically (Yin, 2013). It should be noted that while the research methods employed, Individual In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and thematic analysis, are well-established globally, their application to analyze the gendered patterns of personnel risk management in the Polish institutional context represents a **novel contribution to the domestic literature**. The aim here was to relate the empirical results to the existing theory of Balanced HRM and to show how the identified mechanisms, regardless of the sample size, explain the process of increasing personnel risk. The study also served as preparation for the planned quantitative analyses, which is in line with the sequential approach of mixed methods, in which the qualitative stage serves to generate theory and verify the validity of model assumptions.

The research sample was selected deliberately, with middle and senior managers (N = 35) invited to participate, who held managerial positions and were responsible for decisions concerning teams, which ensured that human resource management practices in real organisational conditions could be captured. The respondents represented four sectors: IT, finance, higher education, and training and development, which allowed for a comparison of practices in different institutional contexts. The sample included 23 women and 12 men.

The diversity of organisation sizes, from micro-enterprises to medium-sized companies to large corporations, allowed for an analysis of how structural conditions influence the possibilities for implementing sustainable HR practices and personnel risk management strategies. Empirical data were collected through in-depth individual interviews (IDIs), which allowed for a free but focused exploration of the meanings and interpretations given by managers to HRM practices and risk management. The analysis was conducted in accordance with the six-step thematic analysis procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

4. Results

Analysis of the empirical material revealed clear differences in the ways of managing personnel risk, which spontaneously emerged in the managers' statements. This section reports the empirical patterns identified in the interview material; theoretical interpretation is reserved for the Discussion section. Firstly, during repeated readings of the transcripts, regularly recurring patterns were noticed in how respondents recognise warning signs, respond to problematic situations and incorporate (or ignore) elements of organisational learning in their teams. These recurring patterns became the starting point for further analysis. As the analysis deepened, it became apparent that managers differed significantly in their perception of risk signals. Some of them attached great importance to subtle signs of employee overload, low morale or withdrawal from communication. Their statements were dominated by a strong focus on relationships, attention to the team atmosphere and care to ensure that problems were identified before they escalated into incidents.

The second group of managers focused on actions taken mainly after a problem had arisen, emphasising the need to quickly restore operational efficiency and enforce procedures. In the next phase of the analysis, these qualitatively different approaches began to form two consistent patterns of behaviour, which can be described as a preventive-relational style and a task-reactive style. The analysis process identified two polar types of management styles. It should be noted that five respondents (approximately 14% of the sample) were identified as having a mixed style, combining features of both approaches in a way that prevented clear dichotomous classification. In accordance with the assumptions of the typological analysis, these cases were not included in the analysis in order to ensure the clarity of the characteristics of the identified borderline patterns. Table 1 presents a detailed distribution of these styles by gender of respondents.

Table 1.

Distribution of dominant personal risk management styles among female and male respondents (N = 35)

| Style | Women (n = 23) | Men (n = 12) | Total (n = 35) |
|-----------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| Preventive-relational | 16 | 3 | 19 |
| Task-reactive | 4 | 7 | 11 |

Source: Own analysis based on interviews. The table only includes studies in which researchers were able to identify a dominant style. Mixed styles were omitted.

The preventive-relational style was characterised by a proactive approach to personnel risk and a strong emphasis on building interpersonal relationships. Managers exhibiting this pattern sought to prevent potential personnel problems through early identification of threats and attention to trust and good communication within the team. This style involves a proactive and relational approach to employees. Managers representing this style emphasise building positive relationships within the team, communication and employee engagement, as well as taking action to prevent potential personnel problems. This manifests itself, among other things, in the implementation of development and mentoring programmes, regular discussions with employees about their needs and satisfaction, monitoring signs of burnout or frustration, and responding quickly to the first signs of a decline in motivation. Such leaders try to prevent conflicts or resignations by building trust and providing support before minor difficulties escalate into serious problems.

The preventive-relational style is characterized by a high intensity of informal voice channels. Managers using this approach focus on the early detection of 'soft' signals, prioritizing interpersonal trust as a primary risk mitigation tool. The study noted that this style was more often declared by female managers. Respondents described their approach as "taking care of people so that they don't have to put out fires later", emphasising the importance of relationships, empathy and prevention in personnel management. This observation is consistent with earlier studies suggesting that women in managerial roles are more people- and relationship-oriented and prefer a participatory/democratic style (Eagly, Johnson, 1990; Helgesen, 1990). This translates into a tendency to notice soft signals of problems (e.g., a deterioration in team morale) earlier and to take preventive action.

The second identified style is the task-reactive style, characterised by a focus on the completion of tasks and objectives and reacting post factum to personnel incidents only when they begin to disrupt results. Managers who display this style focus primarily on measurable work results and current operational activities, treating personnel issues as secondary and dealing with them mainly when they become acute (e.g. a key employee resigns, a conflict within the team disrupts work, productivity declines). They are characterised by reactivity: instead of investing time in prevention, they "put out fires" once they have broken out. The statements of such respondents included comments such as: "as long as everything is going well, there is no need to overdo the conversations, people should do their job, and if something happens, then I intervene". This style is also associated with a more instrumental approach to

employees, with the manager focusing on assigning tasks, enforcing results and using mainly formal HR tools (procedures, periodic evaluations) instead of informal conversations about staff well-being.

In the sample studied, male managers were more likely to declare this attitude. Many of them emphasised the need to "maintain discipline" and not "spoil" employees, recognising that excessive focus on their needs can distract from business goals. Examples of statements illustrating this approach are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Examples of statements by managers, tailored to their management style

| Personnel risk management style | Quote: |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Style 1 – preventive-relational | "I always keep an eye on what's going on in the team and try to spot potential problems in advance. For me, relationships are key. When people know what's going on, (...) they feel listened to and appreciated, and are much less likely to become a problem for the organisation". |
| Style 1 – preventive-relational | "(...), it's mainly about catching problems with people before they escalate. When I see that someone is struggling or seems nervous, I don't wait, I sit down right away, talk to them and ask what's going on. If you have normal contact with people, a sincere relationship, you can often stop a small thing before it grows into a problem that really affects the company". |
| Style 1 – preventive and relational | "For me, it's crucial to be close to people. (...) When I'm with the team on a daily basis, I can immediately see when something starts to go wrong, when someone withdraws, when someone complains more often. Then I react, talk, try to get to the root of the problem. It's better to ask five times too early than once too late, when the issue has already turned into a conflict or the departure of an important person". |
| Style 1 – preventive-relational | "(...) the problem starts with minor frustrations that no one noticed. When people have the space to honestly say what is bothering them, we are able to address it before it turns into absenteeism, a decline in commitment or some passive blocking of change. Without such daily conversation, there can be no real risk management". |
| Style 1 – preventive and relational | "You can see this very clearly in production, where one frustrated operator can ruin the atmosphere for the entire shift. When I see that someone is constantly irritated, muttering under their breath, I don't sweep it under the carpet. I arrange a meeting to try to understand what is going on: is it the schedule, the conditions, or perhaps a conflict within the team? If you catch these things early on, you can steer them in the right direction instead of having to put out fires later". |
| Style 2 – task-oriented and reactive | "(...) I look at turnover, absenteeism, and periodic assessment results. When I see that they are starting to deviate from what we have set out, it is a signal for me to dig deeper. I prefer to have hard data rather than rely solely on impressions from conversations, because people sometimes get carried away and then when it comes down to it, it's not true". |
| Style 2 – task-oriented and reactive | "We have very clearly defined procedures, from recruitment, through onboarding, to termination. If someone is not delivering, we take specific steps: first a corrective conversation, then a recovery plan, and finally, if necessary, termination. It may sound harsh, but thanks to this (...) everything is organised and predictable". |
| Style 2 – task-oriented and reactive | "I try to look at personnel risk through the prism of results. If someone systematically fails to meet their KPIs, it means we have a potential risk. Only then do I move on to discussions: is it a question of competence, motivation, or perhaps a poor fit for the role? First, the numbers". |

Source: Own work. Note that quote has been translated.

5. Discussion

In interpreting these findings, the identified management patterns are analyzed through the theoretical framework of the psychological contract and psychological safety. While these constructs were not directly measured through quantitative instruments, they serve as interpretive lenses to explain the underlying mechanisms of the identified styles. Specifically, the preventive-relational approach aligns with strengthening the durability of the psychological contract (Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2024; Rousseau, 2011), as it promotes an environment where employees feel safe to voice concerns, thereby stabilizing mutual expectations and reducing personnel risk. In the sample studied, there was a clear tendency for this style to be more common among women, while the task-reactive approach focused on operational discipline and procedural enforcement dominated in the narratives of men. In interpreting the findings, we distinguish between empirical evidence (themes and quotations from interviews) and theory-based contextualisation. Accordingly, any directional statements in the Discussion are presented as interpretive propositions consistent with prior literature rather than as causal effects established by measurement. Although this result corresponds with the meta-analyses of Eagly and Johnson (1990), it should be interpreted with caution. The observed convergence may result not only from gender socialisation, but also from the specific nature of the sectors in which the male respondents were overrepresented (e.g. IT, finance), which often require a more technocratic and procedural approach to risk. Gender is therefore treated here as an important, but not the only, determinant of managerial preferences. It cannot be ruled out that gender differences are secondary to task differences. At the same time, the observed differences are confirmed by research on decision-making preferences, according to which men on average show a greater propensity to take risks (Byrnes, Miller, Schafer, 1999; Croson, Gneezy, 2009). Interpretatively, this means that leaders who prefer a task-reactive style are more likely to accept a higher level of personal risk and allow for ex post reactions, while a preventive-relational style favours early diagnosis of warning signs and ex ante actions.

Both styles represent the poles of a continuum, within which many managers combine elements of both approaches. Nevertheless, their dominant configurations translate differently into practices in the areas of prevention, problem response and organisational learning. The preventative-relational style promotes the identification of early signals, such as a decline in engagement, employee withdrawal or signs of overload, and the initiation of supportive conversations and actions, as confirmed by both qualitative data and the literature on mental health at work (Aust et al., 2020; Cox, Griffiths, 2005). However, it is worth noting that this style comes at a high cost to the leader. A deep focus on relationships and constant monitoring of moods (emotional labour) can lead to emotional overload for the manager themselves, which paradoxically becomes a new area of risk within the organisation.

On the other hand, the task-reactive style, although it involves the risk of later detection of problems, has significant adaptive qualities in crisis situations. Because the interview protocol did not systematically elicit detailed crisis or urgency episodes, this “crisis adaptiveness” is presented here as theoretical contextualisation rather than as incident-level empirical evidence. The discussion of task-reactive leadership suggests it may be adaptive in crisis-like conditions due to its focus on rapid response and operational continuity. However, as the interviews did not focus on specific incident-level crisis episodes, this adaptiveness should be treated as theoretical contextualization rather than empirical evidence derived from the sample. However, its exclusive dominance – often at the expense of a deeper diagnosis of the causes – may increase the risk of recurring problems in the long term (Lipka, 2015; Kaye, Jordan-Evans, 2012). In the reaction phase, the preventive-relational style favours dialogue and mediation, while the task-reactive style favours unilateral and procedural interventions. As a result, the preventive-relational style is more conducive to organisational learning, which requires psychological safety and reflectiveness (Edmondson, 1999; Argyris, Schön, 1978; Vera, Crossan, 2004).

The results of the study make a particularly important contribution to the theory of sustainable HRM. First, they show that the effectiveness of sustainable HR practices depends on individual managerial practices and leadership style, which acts as a “vehicle” for the organisation's intentions. The preventive-relational style reinforces the implementation of long-term sustainable HRM goals, such as well-being, development and maintenance of the psychological contract (Guest, 2017; Armstrong, Taylor, 2016), while the task-reactive style may limit their implementation, especially in dynamic or pressured work environments.

Secondly, the study highlights the importance of the psychological contract as a mechanism of transition between HR practices and the level of personnel risk, integrating the literature on employee-organisation relations (Rousseau, 2004, 2011) with the perspective of sustainable HRM (Ehnert, 2009; Aust et al., 2020).

Thirdly, the results allow for a conceptual organisation of risk management styles as a bipolar continuum, which is an important starting point for further operationalisation and quantitative testing. When interpreting the results, however, it is worth considering, in addition to the aforementioned sector-specific characteristics, other contextual variables that may modulate management style regardless of gender.

Team size and scope of responsibility proved to be significant differentiating factors; managers of large structures more often described task-oriented practices, which resulted from time pressure and the need to maintain operational efficiency. It was noted that managerial seniority strengthened sensitivity to soft signals: more experienced leaders (both women and men) more often declared *ex ante* actions, which suggests a process of learning the role.

Finally, organisational culture was an important background for preferred HR practices: hierarchical, task-oriented, participatory or egalitarian, and comparative literature indicates that institutional norms can reinforce certain styles regardless of gender (Hofstede, 1980; House

et al., 2004). For example, Nordic models favour relationality and prevention, while Anglo-Saxon models more often reinforce task-orientedness and reactivity; this implies that the interpretation of gender differences must take into account the local cultural framework (Sparrow, Schuler, Jackson, 1994; Brewster, 1995).

The originality of the study lies in the fact that it combines three rarely juxtaposed perspectives: individual leadership styles, personal risk levels, and sustainable HRM assumptions. Qualitative analysis revealed not only the existence of two distinct styles, but also their different impacts on prevention, response and organisational learning, which enriches the theory of sustainable HRM with managerial microfundamentals. The study also provides new insights into how gender, not as a determinant but as one of the factors associated with leadership preferences, influences personnel risk management, while emphasising the importance of organisational and cultural context in modulating these relationships. This provides a basis for further quantitative research testing the proposed mediation model and for inter-organisational and cross-cultural comparisons. The potential adaptiveness of this style should therefore be understood as context-dependent rather than universally optimal.

The study indicates that sustainable human resource management is not a homogeneous set of practices, but a complex and diverse system of activities, the configuration of which is co-determined by leadership style and the manager's individual approach to risk. The introduction of the categories of personal risk management styles (preventive-relational and task-reactive) expands existing sustainability-oriented HRM models with a clear risk component. This allows for the conceptualisation of personal risk as a mechanism that differentiates sustainable HRM practices, which has not been present in the literature on the subject until now.

Qualitative results show that gender differences in management styles manifest themselves in different ways of working with risk. These include, among others, the way threats are identified, the approach to conflicts, the logic of decision-making, and patterns of communication and learning. This allows us to refine existing leadership theories, showing that gender differences are not merely abstract, but translate into different paths of personnel risk management.

The article proposes a new theoretical category in the field of HRM: personal risk management style, understood as an integrated set of practices including early identification of warning signs, ways of responding to emerging problems, and mechanisms for learning from events. This construct can be treated as a new theoretical variable with potential for use in future quantitative models, including as a mediator or moderator in analyses using structural equation modelling (SEM).

The results obtained indicate that the course of learning from personnel incidents differs significantly depending on the management style. This is an important theoretical implication because it shows that organisational learning is not homogeneous but is shaped by the dominant leadership style.

The article contributes theoretical value by integrating two areas that have rarely been combined before: human resource management, including sustainable HRM, and risk management. The results suggest that the way managers classify risk affects not only specific HRM processes, but also the shaping of organisational culture and the effectiveness of change management. This opens up the field for further research on the integration of personnel risk with HRM practices and broader mechanisms of organisational functioning.

The results of the study show that the effectiveness of sustainable human resource management depends to a decisive extent on the leadership style, which becomes a tool for translating strategic assumptions into everyday employee management practices.

A preventive and relationship-oriented approach, more often declared by women in the sample, promotes early disclosure of problems, maintenance of the psychological contract and building psychological security, which enables employees to signal difficulties before they escalate. This approach strengthens the long-term stability of teams, as it allows for the diagnosis of threats at the micro level and the modification of HR processes before they lead to increased turnover or absenteeism. In practice, this means that organisations should systematically invest in developing leaders' relational skills – in particular, the ability to conduct one-on-one conversations, identify subtle signs of overload and declining engagement, mediate conflicts, and use dialogue- and support-based interventions. This requires expanding development programmes to include elements of emotional intelligence, managerial coaching and a preventive approach to employee wellbeing. At the same time, organisations should equip leaders with tools to make decisions based on early risk indicators, such as short-term absence trends, signs of overload, pulse survey results, and intentional turnover rates. Collecting and analysing this data allows intuitive signal recognition to be transformed into a systematic prevention mechanism.

It is also worth formalising retrospectives after personnel incidents, treating them as part of the organisational learning cycle: analysis of the root causes of departures, conflicts or burnout should lead to the implementation of process modifications that prevent the same mistakes from recurring. Such actions enable a transition from reactive problem-solving to conscious design of a work environment in which personnel risks are continuously monitored and controlled.

Finally, the results suggest that gender diversity in management teams can be of real value to an organisation. In organisational practice, it seems reasonable to create complementary managerial dyads (or pair a leader with a strong HR Business Partner), where one person is responsible for operational stability (task-reactive style) and the other for monitoring the psychological contract (preventive-relational style). This hybridisation of styles allows the organisation to be secured in two ways: by protecting short-term results and long-term human capital. In multicultural environments, it is particularly important to develop intercultural competencies among managers, which allow them to adapt their actions to local norms regarding employee-employer relations. Only the combination of relational competencies,

analytical tools and contextual sensitivity allows the idea of sustainable HRM to be implemented in a manner consistent with the realities of the organisation.

The study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the empirical material comes from a deliberate, qualitative sample of managers in Poland, which limits the possibility of statistically generalising the findings to other populations. Although sectoral diversity increases the transferability of the findings, the analysis reflects the specific realities of the labour market, which combines elements of the continental and post-transformation models. While remaining aware that the structure of the sample (predominantly female) may have influenced the proportions of styles, another significant limitation is the structure of the sample, which was predominantly female and had an uneven gender distribution across sectors (e.g. male dominance in technical industries). This does not allow for the complete isolation of the influence of industry culture on management style, so future research should aim to select a quota sample to verify whether women in highly task-oriented sectors (e.g. finance) adapt a masculine style or retain a relational orientation.

Secondly, the data is declarative in nature, which entails the risk of self-assessment in line with social expectations and a potential discrepancy between the declared style and the style implemented in practice. In future studies, it is recommended to verify the style through observation or HR data.

Thirdly, some cases presented a mixed profile, suggesting that the style continuum is more complex and that the boundaries between approaches need further clarification. At this stage, it would be valuable to compare managers' declarations with hard data (e.g., turnover and absenteeism rates), which would enable triangulation of sources and increase the accuracy of conclusions.

To address the qualitative limitations of this study, a concrete methodological roadmap for future research is proposed. As detailed in Table 3, the main qualitative categories are translated into candidate scale dimensions and illustrative behavioural indicators to support subsequent quantitative operationalization. This mapping serves as a starting point for item generation and psychometric validation, linking the identified styles to sustainable HRM outcomes such as turnover risk, burnout risk, and organizational learning for future empirical testing.

Table 3.

From qualitative categories to candidate scale dimensions and SHRM outcomes (proposed roadmap)

| Qualitative category (from interviews) | Candidate scale dimension (for future scale) | Illustrative behavioural indicators (examples) | SHRM outcomes for future testing |
|--|--|---|---|
| Early detection of soft signals | Early warning routines | Regular scanning for early signs of overload/withdrawal; proactive check-ins before incidents | Lower turnover risk; lower burnout risk |

Cont. table 3.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| Constant voice channels and 1:1 conversations | Voice-channel intensity | Frequency/availability of structured and informal voice opportunities; responsiveness to voiced concerns | Higher psychological safety; higher organisational learning |
| “Closing” expectations and cooperation rules | Expectation alignment and procedural fairness | Explicit clarification of mutual expectations; consistent communication of rules; follow-up on agreements | Lower psychological contract breach risk; lower turnover risk |
| Monitoring hard indicators and thresholds | KPI thresholding and metrics-based monitoring | Use of absenteeism/turnover/ KPI deviations as primary triggers for managerial action | Faster response time; potential trade-off with burnout/contract outcomes |
| Consistent enforcement of standards | Procedural enforcement and corrective action | Use of corrective conversations, improvement plans, and sanctions when standards are not met | Short-term performance stability; potential long-term commitment risk |
| Knowledge consolidation after events | Post-incident learning routines | Conducting retrospectives; documenting lessons learned; translating incidents into process changes | Higher organisational learning; fewer repeated incidents |

Source: Own work.

Future research should therefore lead to the operationalisation of the preventive-relational and task-reactive styles in the form of psychometric scales, taking into account the assessment of validity and reliability, and then to the confirmation of their factor structure and measurement invariance across genders and sectors. An essential complement to these analyses should be the adoption of a dyadic perspective (supervisor–subordinate). Confronting the leader's self-assessment with the employees' perception would allow for the verification of so-called perceptual congruence and answer the question of whether the manager's preventive intentions are actually interpreted by the team as support.

Another important area for future research is cause-and-effect analysis in longitudinal models. Only longitudinal projects will make it possible to assess whether leadership style actually shapes personnel risk indicators or whether this relationship is modified by other variables. Another valuable direction would be to verify the "hidden costs" of the preventive-relational style by examining the correlation between its use and the level of burnout among leaders themselves. Furthermore, the context of digital transformation cannot be overlooked – an important research question remains how remote and hybrid work modify the effectiveness of both styles and whether the relational approach is sustainable in a virtual environment (e-leadership). The final recommended direction is cross-cultural comparisons, which would allow us to assess which elements of the identified styles are universal and which depend on local institutional norms.

6. Summary

The article shows that personnel risk management is not just a technical procedure, but a complex social process that is strongly dependent on leadership style. It is the manager's style that filters the way threat signals are recognised, determining both the speed of response and the organisation's ability to learn from experience. The styles identified in the study: preventive-relational (more common in women's narratives) and task-reactive (dominant in men) function as two poles of a continuum, with the analysis showing that each has both adaptive qualities and significant limitations.

The preventive-relational style, by affirming the employee's subjectivity, effectively strengthens psychological security and sustains the psychological contract, which promotes proactive risk management (*ex ante*). However, this approach comes at a high cost to the leader: the need for constant emotional labour can lead to manager overload and, paradoxically, generate new risks within the organisation. On the other hand, the task-reactive style, although often criticised for its lack of empathy, plays a key role in ensuring business continuity. Its focus on procedures allows for operational stability in crisis situations and under time pressure. However, its exclusive dominance, achieved at the expense of a deeper diagnosis of the causes, increases the risk of erosion of commitment and the so-called "silent breach" of the psychological contract in the long term.

The contribution of the study is to enrich the theory of Sustainable HRM with managerial microfundamentals and to demonstrate that the full effectiveness of sustainable HRM requires the hybridisation of both approaches. The conclusions suggest that the optimal model is not to eliminate the task-reactive style, but to supplement it with relational competencies (e.g. within managerial dyads), which allows for balancing economic goals with care for human capital. The qualitative limitations of the study justify the need for further quantitative research to verify the stability of these patterns in a wider population and different organisational cultures. From a broader field perspective, the study adds managerial microfoundations to sustainable HRM by showing how personnel risk management practices can be organised into two coherent styles along the risk cycle. At the same time, the findings should be read as exploratory, given the qualitative and declarative nature of the data and the non-random sample. Practically, the proposed typology can be used as a diagnostic and developmental framework for leadership training and HR business partnering, while the operationalisation roadmap provides a concrete basis for constructing and validating measurement instruments in subsequent quantitative research. Taken together, the findings should be interpreted as analytically generalisable insights that inform theory development rather than as statistically generalisable conclusions.

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