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Cover Page Footnote

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the participating sustainability managers, whose shared experiences and expertise were instrumental in the realization of this study.

Multilevel Influence of Sustainability Leaders in Business Systems

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Abstract

Existing studies that point to the various influences of sustainability leaders on individuals, organizations, and external stakeholders remain fragmented. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study aimed for a deep examination of leaders' experiences as they built layers of influence through their sustainability initiatives and efforts. The study employed a reflexive qualitative approach in gathering and analyzing data from semi-structured interviews with five sustainability managers working in listed fast-moving consumer goods companies. The results suggested evident patterns of sustainability-promoting actions among the leaders that reflect alignment with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards. Strategies toward effective leadership influence include grounding sustainability efforts in individual contexts, integrating sustainability into corporate culture, and leveraging stakeholders' engagement through partnership. The findings of the study can be used as an anchor in developing sustainability leadership, shedding light on adopting a multilevel-multisystem perspective.

Key terms

sustainability leader; sustainability leadership; Ecological Systems Theory; ESG; reflexive thematic analysis; Philippines

Introduction

Sustainability has been challenging organizations in recent years with the need to change. Extant literature (Dartey-Baah, 2014; Thakhathi et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2014) points to the critical role of leaders and how they approach the process of becoming sustainable. Taking on such a role entails new competencies, however, and there has been scarce attention among scholars on how leaders can learn to act upon sustainability challenges (Haney et al., 2020). Research has focused prominently on the impact of sustainability practices on organizational culture (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Schein, 1992) and organizational effectiveness (Nartgün et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2020). Within these domains, the literature points to the various influences of sustainability leaders toward individual employees (micro) (Liao, 2022; Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2014; Moreira et al., 2022), organizations (meso) (Lizares & Cuyegkeng, 2024; Yabut et al., 2024; Wiengarten et al., 2017; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Macke & Genari, 2019), and external stakeholders (macro) (Szekely & Dossa, 2017; Jayashree et al., 2022). While these studies provide insightful empirical findings, scholarly research on sustainability that is focused on leaders as social actors, by and large, remains fragmented and still lacks theoretical integration and conceptual coherence (Galpin & Lee Whittington, 2012). Given the aforementioned gap in the literature, this study aims to employ Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST; 1986) as a lens in examining sustainability leadership, viewing leaders as multilevel

social actors and how they exert influence on individual employees (micro), organizations (meso), and their external stakeholders (macro).

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's EST, notably created in the field of human development, has also been utilized in organizational research. Past studies have used the framework for strategizing mentoring practices at work (Chandler et al., 2011), understanding inclusive organizations (Doughty & Moore, 2021), designing corporate social responsibility approaches (Musgrave & Woodward, 2016), and examining workplace flexibility, work-family relationships, and individual, workplace, organizational, and community vitality (Yang & Sanborn, 2021). The current study draws on the utility of EST in understanding organizational dynamics by contextually applying the theory to sustainability-oriented organizations, particularly to how sustainability leaders play their roles as social actors exerting influence among organizational stakeholders from a multilevel perspective.

Galpin and Lee Whittington (2012) advocate for an examination of sustainability leadership from a multilevel point of view. A recent conceptual analysis and review by Sajjad et al. (2024) suggests that a multilevel relationship overlap among individual, organizational, and societal levels opens avenues for researchers to understand how leaders work in complex and diverse surroundings and addresses tensions from a

systems perspective. Moreover, Jayashree et al. (2022), in their study on the practice of sustainability leadership, portrayed how stakeholders coexist as reciprocal agents of sustainability, paving the way for future researchers to examine these reciprocating agencies in different contexts, industries, populations, and settings.

These multilevel and multi-stakeholder studies point to the need for viewing organizations as an ecosystem and understanding the role of leaders in embedding sustainability in organizational culture and shaping sustainable practices. Using the EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), this study aims to deeply examine the experiences of leaders as they effectively exert influence through their sustainability initiatives and efforts.

Sustainability Leadership

The concept of Sustainability Leadership (SL) has undergone significant development within the broader discourse of leadership studies. SL is viewed from varying perspectives and has been previously examined through the individual motivations of leaders (Horn & Wehrmeyer, 2020), leaders' roles in incorporating sustainability into organizational cultures (Lizares & Cuyegkeng, 2024), and how it may lead to transformational changes (Schein, 2015; Yabut et al., 2024). According to Strand (2014), sustainability leadership is a strategic approach in which corporate decision-making aligns sustainability objectives with long-term organizational vision, emphasizing ethical responsibility while fostering stakeholder engagement. Similarly, Galpin and Lee Whittington (2012) define sustainability leadership as integrating strategy and organizational culture to achieve long-term success while addressing social and environmental challenges. This aligns with Porter and Kramer's (2019) view of sustainability leadership as creating shared value while embedding sustainability into the business's core strategies to achieve competitive advantage. Moreover, similar scholarly work has framed sustainability leadership as a strategic paradigm of directing organizations toward sustainable development by prioritizing concerns regarding their environmental, social, and governance aspects (Al-Shaer & Hussainey, 2022; Camilleri, 2017; Dathe et al., 2024; Szekely & Dossa, 2017). Building on these views of sustainability leadership, the subsequent section discusses how leaders, guided by the ESG (environmental, social, and governance) framework, influence their organizations in embedding sustainability into their corporate values.

Sustainability leadership within the microsystem. In this study, the microsystem refers to individual-

level influence, particularly how leaders impact employees and other personal factors. Research on Green Transformational Leadership (GTL) indicates a positive correlation with employee green self-efficacy, positivity, and performance, fostering pro-environmental behavior (Sobaih et al., 2022; Li & Khan, 2023; Lathabhavan & Kaur, 2023). Afsar et al. (2019) further demonstrate how leadership encourages pro-environmental actions within organizations. In the social domain, SL practices are linked to employee satisfaction, commitment, and responsibility (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2014; Lee, 2017; Çayak & Çetin, 2018; Dalati et al., 2017; Shaaban, 2020). Liao (2022) supports this by showing that sustainability leaders act as role models, offering resources such as training and coaching to promote sustainability. From an economic perspective, sustainability leadership enhances green performance appraisals, linking them to green compensation and rewards (Ardiza et al., 2021), and fosters employee engagement by emphasizing financial benefits (Merriman et al., 2016). Additionally, involving employees in sustainability decision-making strengthens organizational identification (Farooq et al., 2019).

Sustainability leadership within the mesosystem. The mesosystem in this study focuses on the organizational-level influence of sustainability leaders, shaped by management support, resources, policies, culture, and systems. Ahsan and Khawaja (2024) found a significant relationship between sustainability leadership and environmental performance, moderated by organizational resilience. Similarly, Karawya (2024) identified green leadership as a predictor of organizational performance and corporate image. Challenges to adopting ecological sustainability, such as low stakeholder support and poor management focus, highlight the importance of leadership in advancing sustainability initiatives (Fenwick, 2007). SL also positively impacts organizational outcomes. Moreira et al. (2022) showed that SL fosters a culture of recognition, enhancing stability and employee retention, while Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej (2022) linked SL to improved employee well-being, resilience, and productivity. In terms of governance, Liao (2022) demonstrated that sustainability leaders leverage organizational culture to promote sustainability values and goals. Sustainability leadership strengthens a culture of sustainability and innovation, emphasizing ethical practices and value creation (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Tideman et al., 2013). SL has also been associated with organizational learning, financial performance, corporate reputation, stakeholder satisfaction, and innovation (Sajjad et al., 2024; Kantabutra & Avery, 2013). In Asia, studies have shown a positive link between SL and

corporate financial performance (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016; Nartgün et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2020). Finally, Miralles-Quiros et al. (2017) found that sustainability leadership, as reflected in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, is seen as valuable by investors across European markets.

Sustainability leadership within the macrosystem.

In this study, the macrosystem refers to external stakeholders influencing an organization's ability to achieve its sustainability goals, either by facilitating or restricting progress. Sustainability models prioritize societal and environmental interests, aligning with the triple bottom line—profit, planet, and people (Bocken et al., 2019). Leaders balance these priorities beyond just shareholder interests (Jayashree et al., 2022) and play a crucial role in integrating climate concerns into business strategies, considering diverse stakeholder perspectives (Marks et al., 2024). Regarding social benefits, Rosário and Boechat (2025) found that ESG integration enhances resilience and positively impacts communities as stakeholders. For example, partnerships with indigenous groups in renewable energy projects demonstrate successful collaboration while respecting rights and knowledge (Zbona & Garro, 2024). Filho et al. (2025) concluded that community-centric sustainability efforts in academic institutions improve both academic environments and the communities they serve. In governance, Sajjad et al. (2024) view sustainability leadership as fostering cross-boundary collaboration and shared governance. Gonzales (2024) highlights how leadership values and styles influence stakeholder engagement and corporate financial performance. This aligns with Szekely and Dossa (2017), who argue that sustainable organizations positively affect all stakeholder groups.

Statement of the Problem

The literature synthesized in this study highlights the outcomes of sustainability leadership at different levels—that of individual employees, the organization, and external stakeholders. Galpin and Lee Whittington (2012) put forth that the path to successful sustainability efforts depends on both macro (organization-wide) and micro (manager to employee) organizational factors, and advocate exploring SL from a multilevel perspective. However, the recent conceptual review of Sajjad et al. (2024) concluded that the scientific understanding, to date, of SL in the field of leadership studies remains diverse and fragmented due to its complexity and multidimensionality. An ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) will enable an understanding of how individuals (or

leaders, in the context of this study) cascade influence significantly across the micro, meso, and macro levels, and will give a holistic view of leadership influences from a systems perspective.

Given the gaps in the literature, the study sought to contribute to current knowledge on sustainability leadership by asking the question, “How do sustainability leaders influence stakeholders in a multilevel system?”

- a) How do they enable sustainability practices and attitudes among employees with whom they work?
- b) How do they shape the organization's sustainability initiatives and practices?
- c) How do they influence sustainability practices among their direct external stakeholders?

Method

The study employed a qualitative approach in understanding sustainability leadership. Through this exploratory approach, the experiences of sustainability leaders as multilevel social actors were examined, particularly regarding how their influence takes place across multilevel systems. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022) was used to examine the data.

As presented in Table 1, five sustainability managers of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) corporations participated in the study. The chosen participants were in charge of sustainability programs at their companies, had an adequate understanding of the company's sustainability vision and strategy, and had influence on decisions regarding the organization's sustainability efforts. This study employed both purposive and snowball sampling techniques to engage elite informants, who are described as “key decision makers who have extensive and exclusive information and the ability to influence important firm outcomes, either alone or jointly with others” (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021: 2).

A semi-structured interview guide was used during data collection based on the guidelines of Adams (2015). The questions included the following: “How do you encourage your employees to participate in the sustainability initiatives of the organization?”, “What are your influences in the decision-making regarding the company's sustainability?”, and “How do you influence the sustainability practices of your direct external stakeholders (e.g., industry partners, suppliers, consumers, etc.)?”

Leader	FMCG Type/Products	Position Title	Functions
SL1	Processed and packaged foods	Sustainability and Corporate Communications Head	Sustainability report compliance, corporate social responsibility
SL2	Snacks and confectionery	Sustainability Data Manager	Sustainability data integrity, partnerships
SL3	Beverages	Corporate Sustainability Lead	Sustainability report compliance, corporate social responsibility, branding
SL4	Beverages	Corporate Sustainability Lead	Sustainability report compliance, corporate social responsibility
SL5	Packaged foods and animal feeds	Sustainability Manager	Corporate social responsibility, public relations

Table 1: Interviewee's Company Type, Position Title, and Leadership Function

After acquiring ethics clearance from their university, the authors sent invitation letters to prospective participants. Those who replied in the affirmative were asked to sign an informed consent form (ICF). Personal and online interviews were then conducted depending on the preferred modalities of the participants. The duration of the interviews varied based on the depth of participants' responses and the extent to which they expounded on their experiences, with the average time span lasting 57 minutes.

The data collection was concluded upon reaching five participants. The proponent's decision to conclude the data collection at this point was consistent with the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of Braun et al. (2022: 17), putting weight on "information richness" (the point at which the data collection has obtained detailed, rich, and nuanced data providing in-depth insights into the phenomenon being studied) and the pursuit of "conceptual adequacy" (the point at which the researcher has reached a sufficient or adequate depth of understanding to build a theory) rather than on numerical sufficiency.

The study was guided by the analytical procedures of Braun et al.'s (2022) RTA, which is an inductive approach in analyzing patterns of meaning in qualitative data and highlights the active role of the researcher in the process. Different from the procedure of a codebook approach to thematic analysis that is usually deductive and structured, RTA emphasizes the researcher's active engagement, subjectivity, and reflexivity throughout data analysis (Braun et al., 2022). The themes were generated directly from the interviews, underscoring a commitment to data-driven inquiry and allowing the voices of the participants to form the thematic outcomes. Following a six-step process, the analysis went through data familiarization,

initial coding, theme construction, theme development, and theme refining-defining-naming, culminating in writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with these principles of RTA, the data analysis applied a hierarchical coding frame to differentiate the themes among the micro, meso, and macro systems, particularly on the challenges to sustainability and how the leaders enabled sustainability attitudes, practices, and/or initiatives among employees, the entire organization, and their external stakeholders.

Throughout the research process, starting from the construction of the interview guide to the interpretation of themes, the researchers upheld an awareness of how their prior knowledge and personal values may shape the conduct of the study. Consistent with the principles of RTA, these influencing factors were not bracketed out; rather, they were acknowledged as essential to the co-construction of meaning between the researchers and participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To substantiate this reflexive stance, the researchers engaged in continuous self-reflexive dialogue throughout the research process and regularly consulted with each other. This enabled a critical examination of the data, challenged some underlying assumptions, and gave space for contrasting alternative interpretations, especially during the analysis phase.

Quotes presented in the succeeding results section were translated into English. The actual quotes can be made available upon request.

Results

The results reflected strategic approaches through which leaders effectively influence a multilevel stakeholder system, shaping employee motivation, organizational

	Challenges	Strategies
Macro (External Stakeholder)	Government's lack of comprehension regarding sustainability Ambiguous and complex sustainability policies Conflicting agenda of the government agencies Lack of community preparedness	Leveraging stakeholders' engagement through partnerships Tailoring a sustainable value chain Attaining credibility through clear structure, procedures and programs Contextualizing sustainability through a grassroots approach of leadership Employing an encompassing multistakeholder approach
Meso (Organization)	Balancing initiatives and cost due to limited resources Lack of organizational support and buy-in	Executing sustainability by regulatory compliance Aligning sustainability efforts with corporate goals and values Establishing sustainability co-leadership Integrating sustainability into corporate culture Supporting decisions with data-driven insights Setting specific and measurable targets
Micro (Individual)	Convenience bias among employees Weak employee acceptance and awareness	Grounding sustainability efforts in individual context Embedding sustainability into workplace practices Enhancing sustainability awareness through education Leading by example Incentivizing employee participation

Figure 1: Influencing Process of Sustainability Leaders

decision-making, and external stakeholder engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the influencing process of sustainability leaders, providing evident patterns of challenges and effective influencing strategies across the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Challenges Across Multilevel Systems

Sustainability leaders play a crucial role in driving advocacies beyond policy compliance. However, their ability to exert influence is often hindered by evident challenges reflective of the stakeholder's context. Leaders must navigate employee biases, corporate resistance and pressures, and stakeholder skepticism while advocating for long-term sustainability initiatives. Moreover, they face the complexity of implemented policies, regulatory uncertainties, and the need for leveraging an encompassing multi-stakeholder approach for buy-in.

Microsystem. Employee engagement in organizational sustainability is shaped by views, attitudes, behaviors, and biases that influence participation in sustainability initiatives. Positive attitudes enhance commitment, while biases like convenience and workload can hinder adoption. Sustainability leaders identified challenges within

the microsystem, including convenience bias, weak employee acceptance, and lack of awareness.

Convenience bias among employees. Employee biases toward convenience over compliance undermine leadership influence, as individual participation is key to sustainability. SL3 noted, "Sometimes, it's convenience that happens to be the challenge," while SL2 observed, "They differ in terms of commitment, asking what's in it for me."

Weak employee acceptance and awareness. A limited understanding of sustainability can lead to employee resistance, as they may struggle to grasp its relevance. SL1 noted challenges in "readiness and the level of understanding," while SL4 highlighted a general "lack of awareness." SL2 added that introducing new concepts requires time and adaptation due to varying levels of employee comprehension.

Mesosystem. A strong commitment from management, clear sustainability policy, and structured processes are critical in guiding decision-making and ensuring consistent implementation of sustainability initiatives. Access to financial and human resources significantly influences the feasibility and longevity of these efforts. Furthermore, a sustainability-oriented

organizational culture fosters employee alignment and reinforces sustainability as a core value rather than as a mere compliance measure. However, sustainability leaders identified key organizational-level challenges, including resource constraints, cost-benefit tradeoffs, and insufficient leadership support.

Balancing sustainability with resource limitations. Implementing sustainability initiatives often demands upfront investment and operational changes, which can strain budgets and complicate short-term business priorities. SL5 asked, “How would you convince management to invest if you’re not certain with the ROI?” SL2 noted, “There are tradeoffs ... you can’t purchase a machine that’s efficient but leads to loss.” SL4 highlighted the tension: “It’s balancing sustainability with business priority.” Limited resources further complicate efforts. As SL5 stated, “You want to help the world, but you’re also limited with the company budget.” SL4 added that in FMCGs, adapting to sustainable packaging with limited resources and partners is especially challenging.

Lack of organizational support and buy-in. Insufficient management support undermines leaders’ capacity to implement meaningful change. As SL1 explained, “It’s very difficult to get buy-ins ... even to understand the word sustainability.” Without executive backing, programs struggle to gain approval: “You must have a sustainability champion at the board level.” SL3 added, “If you cannot encourage the leaders, you cannot get the same support with their people.”

Macrosystem. The success of corporate sustainability efforts is significantly shaped by external stakeholders, including government agencies, local government units, businesses, suppliers, communities, academia, alliances, and NGOs. National and local governments play a regulatory role, ensuring alignment with national and global standards. Inter-organizational partnerships facilitate innovation, benchmarking, and resource sharing, while engagement with communities and academic institutions strengthens program relevance through knowledge exchange and capacity-building. NGOs contribute by advancing advocacy, inclusivity, and transparency in sustainability initiatives. However, sustainability leaders report recurring challenges in engaging external actors. These include limited government understanding of sustainability, ambiguous and complex policies, conflicting agendas among agencies, and unprepared communities.

Lack of government comprehension regarding sustainability. Sustainability leaders frequently encounter policy inconsistencies and weak enforcement due to a lack of government comprehension. As SL3

observed, “it’s hard for us to put up with LGUs ... they’re not even familiar with EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) law,” while SL2 noted that many government counterparts lack dedicated sustainability roles, hampering collaboration.

Ambiguous and complex sustainability policies. Unclear policies, such as the EPR law, pose implementation difficulties. The involvement of multiple agencies without defined roles creates institutional overlap and inefficiencies. SL5 emphasized that the EPR law lacked sufficient strategy and infrastructure, noting that “the law was implemented without analyzing if we have [a] proper strategy in place.”

Conflicting agendas of government agencies. Misaligned objectives among government bodies complicate coordination and delay program execution. SL2 recounted issues of corruption and exploitation in project implementation that necessitated third-party intermediation. SL3 shared, “When they presented a program, (it’s) as if we are the cash cow and they are difficult to negotiate with.”

Lack of community preparedness. Community partners’ resistance to change and limited awareness hinder program adoption. SL3 highlighted difficulties in engaging unprepared communities, stating, “Even if we cascade the program, we cannot ensure diversion of our wastes in that area.” SL1 echoed that receptivity remains a challenge.

To address these challenges, sustainability strategies must be designed at multiple levels—individual, organizational, and external—while acknowledging that stakeholder engagement and the influence of leadership vary across these domains. As will be seen in the succeeding section, multilevel alignment enables adaptive, responsive, and integrated approaches, fostering systemic and sustainable change.

Strategies at the Micro Level

Sustainability leaders play a crucial role in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of individuals toward sustainability. Strategic approaches are vital for sustainability leaders to ensure that programs are executed effectively, set for the long term, and deeply embedded in organizational culture. Integrating sustainability into corporate values advocates for sustainability leaders to act as key figures and catalysts of change in a workplace where sustainable behaviors among employees become the norm.

Grounding sustainability efforts in individual contexts. For sustainability leaders to influence

employees effectively, communicating sustainability must be relatable and personalized to individual contexts. According to SL1, “a way to do that is to connect it to their personal and work experience so that they can relate to it.” This refers to a simplified approach in communicating sustainability, for instance, how employees from their manufacturing plants can contribute to sustainability practices through water conservation, or how office staff can help reduce energy consumption through the efficient use of air-conditioning units. SL2 supported this, saying, “It will not be successful if the employees do not understand what the policy means and how it translates to them; that’s why I’m saying that the campaign should be at their level.”

Embedding sustainability into workplace practices. Driving actual impact and fostering the long-term commitment of employees, while ensuring that these efforts become a core organizational culture rather than a short-term initiative, are essential for entrenching sustainability in workplace practices. SL1 highlighted that embedding sustainability means “ensuring that certain practices at the corporate level are integrated into the individual personal lives of the employees, for instance, a simple practice of proper segregation of our wastes.” SL2 also shared: “We have trash bins in the office that collect plastics [that] employees individually contribute and we donate those.” SL4 reflected that “[by] encouraging employees to take part in daily operations, even for a simple waste management practice in the workplace, I find my role evident and efficient.” To monitor consistent participation toward sustainability, SL2 also disclosed that “We have what we call [a] Behavioral Observation System (BOS) to reinforce on a daily basis.” In their company, this involves the use of a digital tracking tool to monitor employee behaviors aligned with sustainability, such as efficient energy consumption, performance evaluation using Key Sustainability Indicators (KSIs) as the basis of a reward system for employees, and feedback reinforcement for noncompliance and corrective actions.

Enhancing sustainability awareness through education. Education is one of the most effective leadership tools for influencing individuals and promoting sustainability awareness. Strategic ways of educating and training employees lead to their motivation, understanding, and confidence in embracing sustainable practices. SL1 shared, “For me, it’s always [about] educating people. It’s a never-ending process, so education and training are important for them to really understand it.” SL2 also shared that they provide “orientation for the newly-hired, and for all employees; they’re required to go to a refresher, like every month, we have a topic for

the campaign.” SL5 also emphasized the importance of training and mentioned that “we conduct training as, of course, awareness is a key when you’re introducing behavioral changes through education and employee engagement.” Moreover, SL3 recalled, “I’ve noticed that my colleagues became more aware and conscious of the efforts [since] the time that we launched our campaign drive on sustainability (waste reduction) and when we [held] this information drive campaign with our manufacturing plants.”

Leading by example. Employees are motivated to adopt sustainability when they observe that the leaders themselves practice it in their ways of living. Sustainability leaders cannot expect their followers to participate in their efforts if they do not practice what they preach. Leading by example is one of the most influential ways, as it builds trust, credibility, and a sense of accountability. SL3 expressed, “For me, in my opinion, first is to lead by example.” SL4 supported this view and commented, “How will your employees trust your initiatives if they don’t see you practicing [these]? As they say, change starts from within.” Moreover, SL2 shared that “in our company, it’s very easy because even the leaders walk the talk.”

Incentivizing employee participation. Extrinsic motivation drivers play a vital role in strengthening sustainable behaviors, making the efforts rewarding, gratifying, and fulfilling on the part of employees. Incentivizing participation increases engagement and enhances satisfaction for individuals. SL3 shared that “for you to encourage employees to participate in the drive and bring in waste, you need to have this incentive for your people.” SL2 also emphasized the importance of incentives and disclosed, “It’s a way of our company to put priority on sustainability by incentivizing, meaning, our bonus relies on carbon reduction reports of the plants.”

Strategies at the Meso Level

Sustainability leaders serve as social actors and change agents to drive the integration of sustainable practices into the core of business operations. With their function to bridge efforts across multilevel systems, sustainability leaders are tasked with setting clear targets aligned with the attainment of corporate goals. Their role is pivotal in the engagement of internal stakeholders, from employees to the management level, and in fostering a shared understanding of the essence of sustainability. By spearheading compliance with policies and translating these into the practice and culture of the organization, leaders ensure that sustainability efforts are embedded across departmental functions.

Executing sustainability through regulatory compliance. The execution of sustainability efforts through regulatory compliance is fundamental as it establishes a legally sanctioned and methodical framework for organizations. According to SL2, “The non-negotiable is the regulatory. Comply first with the regulatory, and if you’re complying, basically, you’re operating in a sustainable manner—that’s how regulatory requirements are designed.” SL5 shared that “if there are updates from the government, we are the ones to know first, and so feedback to the organization is essential for compliance.” Moreover, SL1 highlighted that “if you really want to be effective first, you cannot get away without saying it’s for compliance purposes, and eventually, once the people get the hang of it as it’s for compliance, then people will realize there’s added value to what we’re doing.”

Aligning sustainability efforts with corporate goals and values. By ensuring that sustainability efforts are aligned with corporate priorities, sustainability leaders can effectively exert influence and secure buy-in from management. SL4 asserted that “we need to highlight how sustainability ties with the company’s goals, mission, and values,” and contextualize it to the role of “understanding consumer preference, incorporating sustainability into product development, packaging, [and] labels, and communicating sustainability to consumers.” SL5 shared, “Our reports on sustainability goals also need to reflect the management’s priority and [make] sure we are preparing our sustainability efforts toward our long-term goals.”

Establishing sustainability co-leadership. Seeking participation with other leaders in the organization through a more collaborative, inclusive, and cross-functional approach was evidently an effective tactic. Co-leadership inspires a shared sense of ownership among managers, attaining goals through their respective departmental functions and ensuring stronger buy-in from internal key stakeholders. SL3 shared, “You really ensure that you talk to the leaders within the organization. If you cannot encourage the leaders, you cannot get the same support [from] their people.” SL1 recalled that “we always get in touch with the different business units, our counterparts there, from the general manager to the different division heads or department heads, for a stronger buy-in.” Moreover, SL5 acknowledged the importance of collaboration and mentioned that “the ones holding sustainability leadership are in the best position to contribute to stakeholder engagement and, of course, [play an important role] in promoting collaboration, consultation, and coordination.”

Integrating sustainability into corporate culture. Leaders advocate a fundamental role in weaving sustainability into the fabric of organizational culture. When sustainability efforts become ingrained in the culture, they become an integral part of how a corporation operates and how it contributes to the attainment of sustainability goals. This cultural integration allows sustainability leaders to influence strategic direction and the day-to-day practices adopted across all functions and departments. SL5 reflected that a crucial role of sustainability leaders in exerting influence on the organization is “to embed sustainability in workplace culture.” SL2 acknowledged that “there’s always the culture part because that would sustain the effort, from the factory level up to the worker level, if they understand what sustainability means.” In addition, SL4 suggested that “to foster organizational culture, leaders need to show visible commitment to sustainability.”

Supporting decisions with data-driven insights. Sustainability goals supported by data allow leaders to establish a strong business value for their initiatives. Given that data serves as factual evidence, this strategy can aid leaders in making well-informed decisions, make the recommendations more persuasive, and mitigate the risks of committing errors from plain assumptions. SL5 shared that “with other people I collaborated with, it really helped me to have more insights in terms of data and measurable outcomes of the initiatives.” SL5 further explained that “the initiatives need to be discerned—discerned with a key in mind that you’re for sustainability, but you’re also for the company, and to uplift whatever goals the company has—revenue growth, for instance.” SL3 supported this strategy and commented that “in terms of doing a lot of insights, I put in together all those insights and put a plan; mainly, it should be honest and correct.”

Setting specific and measurable targets. Corporations prioritize what they can measure. Specifying measurable targets is essential for sustainability leaders to influence their organizations effectively, as doing so translates sustainability efforts from a vague aspiration into a more concrete and actionable plan. Defining targets clearly helps ignite interest from investors and other stakeholders who, by business as usual, expect tangible returns. SL1 mentioned that “meeting the KPIs or the targets is really an indication if a unit or department of the organization is able to be effective in what it’s doing.” SL2 emphasized the role of the leader in setting standards for the targets, sharing that “with my role right now, it’s more of high-level management; we set the target if it’s too aggressive or too lax.” Moreover, SL3 explained this influencing strategy and expressed,

“I was able to contribute [to] and influence ... their decision making especially when it comes to [the] deciding factor, on which way to go in terms of our revenue growth for the company, and the core of my job which is to drive customers’ brand loyalty.” SL5 supported this strategy and mentioned that “to seek buy-in from the internal stakeholders of the company, you have to emphasize there the ROI and goodwill.”

Strategies at the Macro Level

Challenged with external stakeholders’ diversified context and perception of sustainability, leaders advocate a crucial role in shaping the mindset, inviting the participation, and encouraging the actions of external stakeholders toward environmental and social changes. By engaging strategically with different groups—government agencies, communities, organizations, customers, suppliers, and investors—leaders drive the transition of sustainability from advocacies into tangible outcomes. Their influence ensures that these efforts translate into a shared responsibility for all stakeholders rather than a competitive advantage, resulting in a symbiotic, encompassing, and larger impact.

Leveraging stakeholders’ engagement through partnerships. Partnership with external stakeholders through shared responsibilities enhances the impact, resources, and credibility of the organization. Tying up with the public sector expedites processes and strengthens collaboration with other stakeholders. SL2 mentioned, “For us to be able to recycle that much plastic, we need help from (the) LGU to collect.” Affiliating with nongovernment organizations (NGOs) enhances expertise and heightens the credibility of their efforts. SL3 disclosed, “We’re hiring an auditor for this one, so you need to partner with a lot of recycling partners like Green Cycle and Plastic Bank.”

Partnerships with other private businesses essentially aid organizations in terms of funding and access to resources. SL2 shared that their strategy “affiliating with a bank is new to us, of course, for financial [support], they provide funding for sustainability projects.” Collaborating with local communities fosters engagement and social impact, ensuring effective, relevant, and inclusive initiatives. SL4 revealed, “We source from our byproducts and check what we can offer to the local community for them to sell, livelihood for some people.” Joining alliances also helps organizations expand their network and benchmark with their practices. SL2 recalled, “We’re part of Net Zero Carbon Alliance (NZCA), we have pledges of what we will commit to the group and (they) link us to different suppliers as well.” Lastly,

the main benefit sustainability leaders acquire in partnering with the academe is access to research, ideas for innovation, and data-driven solutions. SL5 shared, “We have a tie-up with a university in Bulacan helping us detect a reliable count of CO₂ that we sequester and assists us with our bamboo planting projects for environmental rehabilitation.”

Tailoring a sustainable value chain. A sustainable value chain is critical for sustainability leaders as it lengthens their influence across all stakeholders, shapes industry standards, and sets stakeholders’ expectations. Setting expectations with their suppliers, SL4 explained the importance of “setting your clear objective or expectation from the supplier, how you want your product to have a sustainable standard, and recommending what materials to use for packaging.” SL3 mentioned how they optimize their CSR as a platform to communicate sustainability awareness to their consumers, and shared, “It’s our form of communication and we find it effective when our consumers notice our programs and perceive our brand as environment friendly.” SL4 added, “Even the simple word ‘Recycle’ in our label is our implicit way to encourage participation among our consumers.”

Attaining credibility through clear structures, procedures, and programs. A well-defined structure, procedure, and programs are fundamental for sustainability leaders to establish legitimacy and trust with their external stakeholders. SL5 shared that in the company, “We have our sustainability manager who is in charge of specific tasks, and when external stakeholders find out that we have such [an] officer to tap for their concerns, we realized we were able to create that impression as a corporation being truly invested with sustainability initiatives.” SL3 also values the forming of definite procedures and emphasized the notion that “We need to establish first programs here within our organization before we can enhance it outside.”

Contextualizing sustainability through a grassroots approach of leadership. By working from the ground up, a grassroots approach of leadership guarantees that sustainability efforts are locally relevant, community-driven, and inclusive, empowering sustainability leaders to gain trust and inspire action from external stakeholders. SL1 shared, “As an ESG practitioner, you have to have that strength to go out and talk to people, explain to them even [in] the simplest layman’s terms, and share experiences.” SL5 also explained the importance of knowing the context of communities and suggested scanning “how they operate, which goals are attainable and which are not, how we can intervene,

of course, knowing the nuances of the communities to be able to engage with them.”

Employing an encompassing multi-stakeholder approach. A multi-stakeholder approach confirms that sustainability efforts are encompassing, collaborative, and impactful on a larger scale. Through this strategy, leaders can holistically tackle solutions for universal challenges and practically ensure that sustainability efforts are inclusive. SL5 recommended, “It works to have a multi-stakeholder approach, for us to have fruitful discussions with them—where do we meet, and how [do] we benefit each other.” SL5 also emphasized an effective strategy of reaping buy-ins across the stakeholders and shared, “For other stakeholders to participate, you tell them, ‘Actually, we coordinated this with some partners and with this association and then this community,’ something like that, for us to be persuasive.” Nonetheless, SL2 discussed the importance of selecting the right partner when communicating value to stakeholders: “We do the usual campaigns in school, we are very selective when it comes to partnership as we want something that can be sustained in the long run.”

Discussion

This study extends knowledge on sustainability leadership by offering new insights into how sustainability leaders exert influence on various stakeholders. While previous studies have explored the impact of sustainability on individuals (e.g., Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2014), organizations (e.g., Wiengarten et al., 2017), and external stakeholders (e.g., Szekely & Dossa, 2017), few have adopted an integrative perspective on the multilevel influence of leaders. Responding to Galpin and Lee Whittington’s (2012) call, this study examines sustainability leadership from a multilevel perspective, highlighting how leaders navigate complex, diverse environments (Sajjad et al., 2024) and address the unique challenges of different stakeholders (Jayashree et al., 2022). The succeeding sections describe in detail the contributions of this study to the extant literature.

First, Bronfenbrenner’s EST (1986) offers a practical lens for understanding how sustainability leaders drive change across a multilevel system. While challenges vary across ecosystem levels, certain change management strategies—such as policy-to-culture translation, incremental change, and top-down implementation—transcend these boundaries. For example, at the micro and meso levels, leaders play a strategic role in embedding sustainability into workplace

culture by translating policy into practice, consistent with Katzenbach et al.’s (2012) view that effective culture change requires aligning formal structures with policy. Incremental change, as emphasized by Berman & Fox (2023) and Hayes (2023), allows for adaptive, low-resistance transformation. At all levels, a top-down approach enhances leader influence through clear vision-setting, regulatory compliance, and executive endorsement, aligning with findings by Hoppe et al. (2015), Awasthy et al. (2011), and Teng-Calleja et al. (2023). These strategies illustrate how sustainability leaders act as multilevel social agents, reinforcing EST’s relevance in managing complex, systemic change.

Second, viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (EST), the systems perspective is crucial for achieving corporate sustainability. This approach acknowledges that sustainability is shaped by interconnected stakeholders, urging organizations to manage multilevel interactions for long-term success. This aligns with Mensah’s (2019) emphasis on the roles of key players (e.g., government, private sector, civil society) in fostering sustainability awareness and compliance. Empirical studies confirm the importance of a systems perspective in organizational sustainability, helping identify paradoxical tensions (Schulte & Paris, 2024), address corporate governance issues (Nikolić & Zlatanović, 2018), and drive creative, holistic solutions (Basta et al., 2021).

Third, the emerging approaches to sustainability leadership align with the ESG framework (Tanaka, 2016; Schramade, 2016), with leaders playing a crucial role in addressing multilevel challenges (Jayashree et al., 2022). In the environmental domain, leaders drive ecological efforts through policy compliance and value chain integration, promoting environmental stewardship despite regulatory complexities and limited resources. Opoku (2025) highlights the positive impact of eco-regulatory compliance and green supply chains on sustainability performance, cost reductions, and operational outcomes (Eltayeb et al., 2011; Green Jr. et al., 2012; Al Khidir & Zailani, 2009). In the social dimension, leaders foster sustainability education, an inclusive culture, and stakeholder engagement despite awareness gaps and resistance. Wamsler (2020) argues that sustainability education sparks social transformation, while Bertels et al. (2010) emphasize how a culture of sustainability balances economic, social, and environmental goals. The governance dimension focuses on embedding corporate values and data-driven decisions, even amidst stakeholder resistance and investment concerns. This aligns with Baumgartner’s (2014) findings on the synergy between values, strategies, and tools in corporate sustainability,

and Soni's (2024) view that data-driven decision-making shifts organizations toward a sustainable future.

Fourth, the study identifies several effective leadership styles based on the experiences of sustainability leaders. Situational Leadership (Hersey, 1984) is evident in leaders' flexible approaches, adapting to the context of employees, co-leadership roles, grassroots campaigns, and negotiations with business partners. Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978) also emerges as effective, aligning corporate vision with stakeholder motivation and commitment. Environmentally Specific Transformational Leadership (ESTL) enhances employee pro-environmental behavior and participation in sustainability programs (Ren et al., 2024), consistent with findings by Chen et al. (2014) and Abbas (2024) on Green Transformational Leadership (GTL) fostering green performance and mindfulness. Transformational Leadership is recognized as a primary style, emphasizing leading by example, embedding sustainability into practices, and fostering awareness throughout the value chain. In a complex, multi-stakeholder ecosystem, sustainability leaders require collaborative decision-making rather than autocracy. Molenveld et al. (2021) highlight the role of Collaborative Leadership in enhancing stakeholder trust and enforcing sustainability policies. Consistent with Øjvind Nielsen et al. (2024), the study shows that collaboration builds trust, fosters innovation, and strengthens stakeholder engagement, with leaders leveraging partnerships across sectors, businesses, and communities to drive inclusive sustainability programs.

Finally, in the complex supplier-manufacturer-consumer chain of FMCG corporations, sustainability leaders play a crucial role in shaping stakeholder views, attitudes, and behaviors. As gatekeepers of environmental strategies, social responsibility, and corporate ethics, these leaders act as key intermediaries between the firm and its stakeholders. Metcalf and Benn (2013) highlight that leaders are essential in linking organizational sustainability to broader systems, a role that requires specialized leadership. Recent studies on sustainability leadership in manufacturing have highlighted important findings on organizational culture (Yang et al., 2024), green performance (Khadage-Soboh et al., 2024), and green supply chains (Abbas, 2024).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into sustainability leadership and stakeholder dynamics, several areas merit further research, taking into account

1) that the focus on leaders as social actors could be expanded by including perspectives from employees, co-leaders, and partner organizations to reduce bias and strengthen validity;

2) that while insights from the FMCG sector were informative, examining leaders in other industries—such as non-renewable energy—could reveal sector-specific challenges and misconceptions;

3) that future research could develop a survey tool based on identified strategies to quantitatively validate the leadership framework and enable broader, cross-sectoral analysis, and

4) that incorporating the exosystem and chronosystem levels into Ecological Systems Theory applications could deepen the understanding of sustainability leadership.

Practical Implication

This study not only enhances the understanding of sustainability leadership but also provides key practical contributions for organizations at different stages of integrating sustainability into their organization's way of life. First, it offers practical insights for leadership development, recommending level-specific strategies, multilevel change management, and inclusive leadership styles. Second, the study highlights the value of a multi-stakeholder perspective, urging organizations to implement grassroots campaigns, embed sustainability into workplace culture through Behavioral Observation Systems, and adopt best practices through benchmarking and partnerships. Third, sustainability leaders can leverage emerging leadership styles to improve stakeholder engagement, fostering inclusivity, motivation, and collective impact. Finally, in the face of today's VUCA environment, leaders must cultivate resilience, adaptability, and the ability to drive systemic change. A multilevel-multisystem approach provides a comprehensive framework for tackling the complex challenges of sustainability initiatives.

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