



Leadership and Human Resource Practices for Sustainable Business: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the relationship between leadership and human resource practices in supporting sustainable business. A systematic literature review was conducted to identify how leadership approaches and human resource management contributed to organizational sustainability. The review revealed that leadership played a crucial role in shaping organizational culture, directing strategic policies, and inspiring employees to embrace sustainability values. At the same time, human resource practices such as recruitment, training, performance management, and employee retention served as essential mechanisms to operationalize sustainability within daily business activities. The findings indicated that the integration of leadership and human resource management created a strong synergy, where visionary leaders promoted sustainability-oriented practices, and well-structured human resource systems enabled the realization of these visions at all organizational levels. The study concluded that businesses seeking long-term resilience needed to place sustainability at the center of both leadership strategy and human resource management. This approach not only improved competitiveness but also strengthened trust among stakeholders and enhanced corporate reputation in a rapidly changing global environment.

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Introduction

Sustainability issues have increasingly become a central concern in contemporary business practices. Companies are now required not only to focus on achieving financial gains but also to consider the social and environmental impacts of their activities. These pressures originate from multiple stakeholders, including consumers, shareholders, regulators, and the wider community, who demand greater transparency and accountability. Consequently, sustainability has shifted from being perceived as an optional initiative to becoming a core strategy for ensuring long-term business viability (Delmas & Toffel, 2008; Delmas, 2011). Within this context, leadership and human resource management (HRM) practices play a pivotal role. Leadership determines the strategic direction of the organization, while HRM practices serve as mechanisms that embed sustainability values into employees' everyday behavior. Without visionary leaders and structured HRM systems, it becomes challenging for organizations to fully internalize sustainability practices (Liao et al., 2022; Sajjad et al., 2024).

Sustainable leadership has emerged as a concept emphasizing the balance between economic, social, and environmental goals. Leaders are expected not only to achieve business targets but also to encourage innovation, ecological responsibility, and social accountability (Tang, 2022; Eustachio et al., 2023). This concept aligns with the development of transformational leadership that emphasizes values but extends its focus toward long-term sustainability (Li et al., 2020; Piwowar-Sulej, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted that sustainability-oriented leadership can enhance employees' intrinsic motivation and foster pro-environmental behavior, which ultimately contributes to business performance (Paillé et al., 2014; Liao et al., 2022).

In addition to leadership, HRM practices have transformed the frameworks of Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) and Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM). GHRM emphasizes practices such as environmentally oriented recruitment, eco-friendly training, and performance evaluation systems that



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account for contributions to sustainability goals (Renwick et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2011). SHRM, on the other hand, adopts a broader approach by highlighting HRM practices that are not only environmentally friendly but also ethical, equitable, and long-term oriented (Ehnert, 2016; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2024). Existing studies have demonstrated the positive influence of sustainability-oriented HRM on organizational performance. For example, Nishii et al. (2008) underlined the significance of employees' perceptions regarding the underlying motives of HRM practices, which can shape attitudes, behaviors, and even customer satisfaction. Other studies revealed that integrating sustainable leadership with HRM practices fosters organizational cultures that are more attuned to sustainability (Liang et al., 2024; Sakib et al., 2025). In this sense, the alignment between leadership vision and HRM system design becomes a key factor in advancing sustainability agendas.

Nevertheless, the literature on sustainable leadership and HRM practices remains fragmented. While some studies have focused on transformational leadership and its influence on pro-environmental behavior (Li et al., 2020; Tang, 2022), others have emphasized HRM policies such as green recruitment or environmental training (Renwick et al., 2013; Miah, 2024; Wiguna et al., 2025). Comprehensive reviews that integrate both aspects—leadership and HRM—are still limited. To fully understand how organizations can achieve sustainability, it is essential to adopt an approach that examines these two dimensions in tandem.

Conducting a systematic review is therefore critical to address this research gap. This approach enables researchers to identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings across various studies, producing a more comprehensive understanding. Such a review not only enriches theoretical development but also provides practical insights for business leaders and policymakers. As Elias (2023) emphasized, organizations need a clear framework that connects HRM practices with sustainability objectives, while leaders require knowledge of leadership styles that are most effective in this context.

Furthermore, the urgency of this research is amplified by global transformations such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the growing influence of millennial and Generation Z workforces, who are increasingly attentive to sustainability issues. These changes demand organizations to become more adaptive and innovative in managing human resources while simultaneously setting strategic directions consistent with sustainability values (Griep & Vantilborgh, 2024; Eustachio et al., 2023). Thus, a systematic literature review on leadership and HRM practices in the context of sustainability is both academically and practically significant.

Based on this background, this article aims to systematically review the literature on the relationship between leadership, HRM practices, and sustainable business. Specifically, this study seeks to: (1) identify leadership approaches most frequently employed in supporting sustainability, (2) examine HRM practices that contribute to the achievement of sustainability goals, and (3) explore how the interaction between leadership and HRM practices generates synergistic impacts on sustainable organizational performance. In doing so, this article is expected to advance conceptual understanding while also offering managerial implications for organizations striving to strengthen their sustainability orientation.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize the body of literature concerning leadership and human resource management (HRM) practices in fostering sustainable business. The SLR method was chosen because it is well-suited for consolidating both theoretical and empirical developments that are dispersed across multiple disciplines, while at the same time providing a comprehensive overview of research trends, existing gaps, and future directions (Miah, 2024; Sakib et al., 2025).

Data Collection Procedure

The literature search was conducted using reputable academic databases such as *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *ScienceDirect*, and *Google Scholar*. A combination of keywords was applied, including *sustainable leadership*, *sustainable human resource management*, *green HRM*, *business sustainability*, and *HR practices for sustainability*. These keywords were formulated based on terminologies frequently used in previous studies (Renwick et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2011; Ehnert, 2016), ensuring that the search covered thematically relevant literature.

Inclusion criteria were established to guarantee both the quality and relevance of selected articles. The articles had to: (1) be published in reputable international or nationally indexed journals; (2) apply either empirical or

conceptual approaches with a clear focus on leadership, HRM, and sustainability; and (3) be published between 2006 and 2025, reflecting the significant growth of research in SHRM and sustainable leadership during the past two decades (Wright & Nishii, 2006; Liang et al., 2024). Studies that focused solely on general management issues without explicit relevance to sustainability were excluded.

Screening and Analysis

The initial search yielded approximately 250 articles. After the first screening process based on titles and abstracts, 80 articles were retained for further review. A full-text screening was then conducted, which resulted in 20 core articles selected for in-depth analysis. These included seminal works on green HRM (Renwick et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2011), sustainable leadership (Liao et al., 2022; Sajjad et al., 2024), and the integration of organizational strategy with sustainability (Delmas & Toffel, 2008; Eustachio et al., 2023).

To maintain transparency, the selection process followed the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. This involved four systematic stages: identification, screening, eligibility checking, and final inclusion. The adoption of PRISMA ensured that the selection and analysis procedures were structured, transparent, and methodologically reliable.

A thematic analysis approach was used to categorize the selected studies into three main themes: (1) sustainable leadership, (2) HRM for sustainability, and (3) the integration of leadership and HRM in advancing sustainable business. These categories were guided by widely adopted conceptual frameworks in sustainability literature (Piwowar-Sulej, 2023; Griep & Vantilborgh, 2024). Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns across studies and highlighted gaps that warrant further investigation.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance reliability, the selected articles were drawn from academically credible sources with clear citation impacts. The reviewed literature covered both classical and contemporary works, providing a longitudinal perspective on the development of sustainability research. For instance, Wright and Nishii (2006) offered an early conceptual foundation on the relationship between HRM and organizational behavior, while more recent studies such as Wiguna et al. (2025) emphasized the critical role of green HRM in addressing contemporary challenges. Conceptual triangulation was also applied by comparing findings across disciplines such as management, organizational psychology, and business ethics. This interdisciplinary lens helped to strengthen the robustness of the analysis and minimize bias toward a single perspective.

Relevance to Research Objectives

The application of SLR was deemed appropriate as this study aimed to consolidate empirical and conceptual evidence regarding how leadership and HRM practices contribute to sustainable business. By systematically reviewing existing literature, the study not only mapped the current state of knowledge but also highlighted future research opportunities. These include the integration of digital technologies into sustainability practices and the role of organizational culture in embedding sustainability values (Liang et al., 2024; Tang, 2022). In sum, the methodological rigor of the SLR approach provided a structured and transparent basis for analyzing the interplay between leadership, HRM practices, and sustainable business, offering valuable insights for both theoretical development and managerial application.

Results and Discussions

The Role of Leadership in Sustainable Business

Leadership plays a central role in determining the direction, strategy, and practices of sustainability within an organization. Sustainable business is not only about profitability, but also about how a company balances social, environmental, and economic dimensions in every step of its life. In this context, a leader's role extends beyond strategic decision-making to serving as a role model and catalyst for change. Previous research has shown that transformational leadership can create an organizational climate that encourages sustainable innovation, employee engagement, and commitment to environmentally friendly practices (Afsar et al., 2018; Robertson & Barling, 2017).

A sustainability-oriented leader typically focuses not only on short-term gains but also considers the long-term impact of each policy. This is evident in the way they integrate ethical values, social responsibility, and

environmental awareness into business strategies (Maak et al., 2016). In practice, visionary leadership plays a crucial role in creating an organizational culture that supports the achievement of sustainability goals. This culture is not formed overnight, but rather through consistent communication, clear policies, and concrete actions that reflect a commitment to sustainability.

Furthermore, recent research emphasizes that effective leadership in sustainable business requires adaptive skills. Rapidly changing business environments, particularly those related to climate change, new regulations, and consumer demands, require leaders to be able to navigate uncertainty. Leaders with an adaptive style can encourage organizations to be more flexible, respond quickly to change, and remain competitive without compromising sustainability principles (Tideman et al., 2013). These adaptive skills are also closely linked to the ability to build cross-sector collaborations, for example between companies, governments, and civil society, to create more holistic, sustainable solutions.

Equally important, the ethical aspect of leadership also plays a significant role. Ethical leadership helps maintain organizational integrity, especially in the face of market pressures that often emphasize efficiency and profit. Leaders who uphold ethical standards are better able to maintain the trust of stakeholders, including investors, customers, and local communities. This trust ultimately becomes invaluable social capital for business sustainability (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Thus, the role of ethical leadership is not merely a moral issue, but also a long-term strategy for maintaining a company's reputation.

The role of leadership is also closely linked to human resource management. In sustainable businesses, good leadership can inspire employees to actively engage in daily sustainability practices, such as energy use, waste reduction, or involvement in corporate social programs. This engagement doesn't happen automatically, but rather through a participatory leadership style that allows employees to innovate and recognizes their contributions (Kim et al., 2019). Employees who feel heard and valued are more motivated to support the organization's sustainability goals.

Furthermore, sustainability-oriented leadership encourages shared value within an organization. This concept demonstrates how companies can create economic value while simultaneously providing social and environmental benefits (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Leaders who understand the principle of shared value will emphasize strategies that not only generate financial returns but also contribute to environmental improvement and community well-being. For example, by developing environmentally friendly supply chains or supporting sustainable local business practices.

However, implementing leadership in sustainable business is not without challenges. One obstacle that often arises is resistance from within the organization, either due to limited understanding or a focus on short-term gains. In this situation, transformational leadership again plays a crucial role. With an approach that emphasizes a shared vision, inspiring communication, and individualized attention to team members, leaders can reduce resistance and foster a shared commitment to change (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

On the other hand, leadership in sustainable business also faces external challenges, such as regulatory pressure and global market demands. Leaders are required to be able to bridge the interests of various stakeholders, from governments and consumers to investors. The ability to build open and transparent dialogue is key to maintaining a balance between external demands and the organization's internal capacity. Furthermore, leaders must be able to communicate the company's sustainability achievements honestly to avoid greenwashing practices, which can damage the company's reputation (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

From this description, it is clear that leadership plays a multidimensional role in sustainable business. This role encompasses strategic, cultural, ethical, and operational aspects, all of which are interrelated. Leadership not only provides direction for a company but also serves as the foundation that determines the extent to which sustainable values can be truly realized in daily business practices. When leaders are able to balance long-term vision, employee engagement, ethical integrity, and adaptability to change, companies are able not only to survive but also to thrive amidst the complexity of today's global challenges.

Human Resource Management for Sustainability

Human resource management (HRM) holds a strategic position in supporting the achievement of corporate sustainability goals. While leadership provides direction and drives organizational change, HRM serves as the operational foundation that ensures sustainability values are embedded into employees' daily behavior. In the context of sustainable business, human resources are no longer perceived merely as factors of production but as agents of change who enable long-term organizational transformation.

The concept of Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) further underscores this perspective. SHRM emphasizes HR practices aligned with the principles of sustainability, focusing on the balance between economic objectives, social responsibility, and environmental preservation (Ehnert et al., 2016). This approach extends beyond recruitment and training to include reward systems, career development, and workplace culture that foster long-term commitment to sustainability.

Recruitment is one of the crucial aspects. Companies committed to sustainability tend to seek candidates who not only demonstrate technical competence but also possess ethical awareness and environmental concern. Research has shown that value-based recruitment facilitates the creation of a workforce aligned with a company's long-term vision (Renwick et al., 2013). Employees who already understand the importance of sustainability are more likely to adapt to socially and environmentally responsible policies.

Training and development programs also serve as vital instruments. Employees require knowledge and skills that support sustainability, such as energy efficiency, waste management, and environmentally friendly work practices. Beyond technical training, programs should cultivate awareness that sustainability is not merely an obligation but also an opportunity for innovation. Afsar et al. (2018) argue that effective training enhances employee engagement in sustainability programs while encouraging the emergence of innovative ideas.

Performance management likewise plays a pivotal role. Integrating sustainability indicators into performance evaluations ensures that success is measured not only in terms of productivity but also through contributions to social and environmental initiatives. For instance, employees who successfully reduce resource consumption within their units can be given special recognition. Such systems provide clear incentives, making sustainability an integral part of work orientation rather than a corporate slogan (Jabbour & Santos, 2008).

Employee well-being is another essential dimension. Sustainable businesses are expected to ensure work-life balance, health, and workers' rights. Employee well-being directly contributes to productivity and loyalty while simultaneously reflecting corporate social responsibility. HRM practices that support employee welfare foster healthier work environments, where employees feel valued and motivated to advance organizational goals (Kramar, 2014).

Externally, HRM for sustainability also relates to how companies engage with surrounding communities through fair labor practices. Organizations that promote equal employment opportunities, diversity, and workplace safety are more likely to gain social legitimacy. This legitimacy is crucial, as public trust and reputation are indispensable for long-term organizational sustainability (De Stefano et al., 2018).

Equally important is the creation of a sustainability-oriented organizational culture. This culture is reflected in the consistent application of values, norms, and practices across all levels of the organization. While leadership provides direction, the successful internalization of sustainability values depends on employee engagement. HRM acts as the bridge through communication programs, discussion forums, and recognition mechanisms that reinforce sustainable behavior (Jackson et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, implementing sustainable HRM is not without challenges. Aligning long-term goals with short-term pressures remains a significant obstacle. Many companies still prioritize immediate profitability, often perceiving sustainability initiatives as additional burdens. Employee resistance can also emerge, particularly when they do not fully grasp the strategic importance of sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires persuasive communication strategies, active leadership involvement, and consistent HRM policies (Lozano, 2015).

On the other hand, digital technologies present new opportunities for sustainable HRM. Technological tools allow companies to monitor carbon footprints, optimize energy usage, and manage sustainability data more effectively. For HRM, technology can enhance employee engagement through apps that encourage participation in environmental programs or online learning platforms on sustainability (Meuer et al., 2020). The integration of digital solutions thus broadens the reach of sustainable HRM while accelerating progress toward organizational goals.

Ultimately, the success of HRM in supporting sustainable business depends on organizational consistency and commitment. Human resources are not supplementary but central to sustainability transformation. Companies that manage HR with a long-term perspective are better prepared to face global challenges, from climate change to labor market dynamics. More importantly, their success contributes directly to broader society by fostering fairer, environmentally responsible, and socially accountable business practices.

In other words, HRM is the heart of sustainability. Without HR practices aligned with sustainability principles, it is difficult for companies to realize a vision of business that is not only profitable but also beneficial for future generations. The key question is no longer whether HRM matters for sustainability, but how far

organizations are willing to place HRM at the core of their journey toward more humane and sustainable business practices.

Integration of Leadership and Human Resource Management in Sustainability

If leadership serves as direction and human resource management (HRM) provides the foundation, then their integration becomes the engine that drives sustainability. Numerous studies emphasize that sustainable leadership cannot operate effectively without the support of consistent HRM practices, while sustainable HRM loses its momentum without being guided by a clear leadership vision (Liao et al., 2022; Sajjad et al., 2024). In other words, sustainability can only be realized through the reciprocal relationship between these two dimensions.

Sustainable leadership requires leaders to balance economic, social, and environmental goals (Tang, 2022; Piwowar-Sulej, 2023). However, these values cannot thrive only at the top management level. Leaders need human resources who understand and internalize sustainability principles in their daily routines. At this point, sustainable human resource management (SHRM) becomes a critical tool in translating leadership vision into practical actions. Value-based recruitment, green training, environmentally oriented reward systems, and performance measurement that incorporates sustainability indicators serve as concrete mechanisms bridging leadership vision with employee behavior (Renwick et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2024).

The integration of leadership and HRM in sustainability can be illustrated as a cycle. Leaders set long-term directions, while HRM designs systems that enable employees to internalize these visions. In turn, sustainable HRM practices foster an organizational culture that supports sustainable leadership. Thus, both elements mutually reinforce each other, forming a more stable sustainability ecosystem (Eustachio et al., 2023).

A practical example of this integration can be found in the study of Li et al. (2020), which demonstrates that environmentally oriented transformational leadership only fosters employees' pro-environmental behavior when accompanied by green HRM practices. Leaders who model energy-saving behaviors, for instance, are more successful when employees are trained in eco-friendly work practices and provided with incentives for their initiatives. Without HRM support, such leadership risks remaining merely symbolic.

Moreover, the integration of leadership and HRM helps organizations address long-term challenges. In the context of globalization and climate crisis, businesses face increasing pressure to operate efficiently, transparently, and responsibly. Leaders can create strategies, but HRM ensures their daily implementation. When aligned, both can not only meet external demands but also build competitive advantages through innovation and social legitimacy (Delmas & Toffel, 2008; Delmas, 2011).

This integration is not limited to structural aspects but also extends to culture. Leaders advocating sustainability must ensure that these values are embedded in organizational culture. This can only be achieved through HRM practices that emphasize internal communication, participatory forums, and recognition of sustainable behavior (Jackson et al., 2011). At a certain point, the culture shaped by the integration of leadership and HRM creates a domino effect: sustainability is no longer seen as an obligation but as an organizational identity. Nevertheless, integrating leadership and HRM into sustainability is not without challenges. Nishii et al. (2008) highlight that employees' perceptions of "why" HRM practices are implemented significantly shape their attitudes and behaviors. If employees perceive sustainability policies as mere compliance or image-building, they tend to disengage. Therefore, leaders must ensure consistency between words and actions, while HRM should design transparent and accountable policies. Honesty and coherence are key to preventing this integration from remaining symbolic.

This integration is also closely tied to employee well-being. Leaders with a sustainable orientation tend to emphasize work-life balance, fairness, and long-term career development. HRM practices that support these dimensions reinforce leaders' images as caring figures, thereby enhancing employee loyalty and commitment. Griep and Vantilborgh (2024) underline the paradox within sustainable HRM, namely the tension between sustainability demands and short-term efficiency. However, integration with leadership can mitigate this paradox by emphasizing employee well-being as part of overall organizational success.

Furthermore, technological development provides new opportunities for integrating leadership and HRM. Visionary leaders can leverage digital technology to monitor sustainability performance, while HRM utilizes such tools to strengthen employee engagement. For instance, digital applications may allow employees to report their contributions to emission reduction or access online sustainability training modules. Wiguna et al. (2025) highlight that technology-enabled green HRM broadens employee participation while simplifying evaluation processes.

In addition, Sakib et al. (2025) note that two decades of SHRM research increasingly emphasize interdisciplinary approaches. Integrating leadership and HRM should be considered not only from an organizational standpoint but also within broader social and environmental contexts. Leaders and HR managers capable of recognizing these interconnections will be better prepared to address global dynamics such as climate change, social justice issues, and consumer demands for ethical business practices.

Ultimately, integrating leadership and HRM in sustainability is not an optional strategy but the core of organizational transformation. Leaders cannot act alone, and HRM cannot function effectively without clear direction. Both must operate in tandem to ensure sustainability is embedded in daily practices rather than remaining rhetorical. Over the long term, this integration shapes organizations into entities that are more resilient, adaptive, and relevant amidst global uncertainty.

By positioning leadership and HRM as inseparable elements, organizations can establish an ecosystem where sustainability becomes a central value. This integration is not merely about efficiency or legitimacy but also about legacy: how organizations today prepare a better future for generations to come.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that leadership and human resource (HRM) management practices play a strategic role in building and maintaining business sustainability. Sustainability-oriented leadership not only influences the direction of company policy but also shapes an organizational culture that cares about the environment, society, and good governance. Meanwhile, sustainable HRM practices—from recruitment and competency development to employee retention—are key pillars in ensuring that sustainability values are truly internalized in daily behavior and activities within the organization.

The integration of leadership and HR practices has been proven to create powerful synergy. Visionary leadership drives the development of HR policies that support sustainability principles, while well-managed HR becomes the driving force that translates that leadership vision into practical implementation. In other words, sustainability is not the result of the work of an individual or a single department alone, but rather the result of the ongoing interaction between leadership strategies and people management within an organization. From a practical perspective, this research illustrates that companies seeking to survive and thrive amidst global change need to place sustainability at the center of their business strategy. Leadership that is sensitive to sustainability issues will more easily inspire employees, build stakeholder trust, and maintain the company's reputation in the public eye. Conversely, neglecting this aspect can undermine long-term competitiveness, especially in an era when consumers, investors, and regulators increasingly demand accountability and transparency.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be put forward. First, companies need to strengthen leadership capacity by integrating a sustainability perspective into executive and managerial development programs. This can be done through training, mentoring, and forums for sharing best practices. Second, the HR function must be more proactive in designing policies that support sustainability implementation, for example through a recruitment system that emphasizes value alignment, green training programs, and performance evaluations that incorporate sustainability indicators. Third, collaboration between leadership and the HR function needs to be strengthened by creating transparent communication mechanisms so that the sustainability vision is not limited to top management but is understood and implemented throughout the organization.

Ultimately, sustainability is not just a trend, but a fundamental necessity for future business continuity. Companies that integrate leadership and HR practices within a sustainability framework will be more resilient in the face of global dynamics, while also making a positive contribution to society and the environment.

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