

Abstracts for the 21th International Studying Leadership Conference:

'The Leadership Dynamics of Systems Change

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Sustainability leadership in international contexts – an exploration of intrinsic and extrinsic factors

To address the economic, social and environmental challenges of sustainability organizations regardless of size and context are asked to create new business models as well as new models of leadership for sustainability. As argued by Fry and Egel (2021) these models should consider working across international, national, regional and local boundaries balancing local and global responsiveness to provide sustainable solutions to the multitude of stakeholders invested in the triple bottom line. Literature on leadership for sustainability is a slowly emerging field of scholarly research (Fry and Egel 2021) where three strands of literature can be identified that are at different evolutionary stages: Sustainability leadership, Responsible leadership and Conscious Leadership.

The literature on sustainability leadership is scant, and only six existing studies were identified by the authors, among them work conducted by Iqbal, Ahmad, Nasim & Khan (2020), who explored the relationship between the concepts of psychological empowerment, psychological safety, sustainable leadership and sustainable performance among 405 SMEs in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. Using a structural equating modelling approach the authors found that among others organisational learning and psychological safety mediated the relationship between sustainable leadership and sustainable performance. Overall Fry and Engel (2021) concluded that the key problem is the lack of conceptualisation of the term Sustainability Leadership.

More literature is available on the concept of responsible leadership, Fry and Egel (2021) identified 13 studies, yet there is a thirst for more research into the concept. The third relevant concept, ie. conscious leadership is a nascent emergent paradigm, of relevance to the concept of Sustainability Leadership. However, little/ no research study seems to have explored the concept within the wider sustainability leadership context. Against this background of gaps in the literature Fry and Egel (2021) develop the Global Leadership for Sustainability Model (GLFS), which brings together a number of essential concepts such as a vision for sustainability, hope and faith, spiritual well-being, the triple bottom line, a global mindset for sustainability, altruistic love and community.

At the same time the growing imperative for more sustainable living patterns asks for behavioural change. For this purpose we take the model of Prochaska and DiClemente (1983), who argue that both individuals and organizations progress through a series of five stages of change and that behavior change involves a process that occurs in increments and that involves specific and varied tasks is at the heart of the transtheoretical model of intentional human behavior change (TTM; DiClemente & Prochaska, 1985, 1998; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983, 1994). This model offers an integrative framework for understanding the process of behavior change. The stages of change ie. precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance represent a key component of the TTM and describe a series of stages through which people/organisations pass as they change a behavior. Representations of these five stages vary, from a linear process model to a spiral model following Grover and Walker (2003) who developed the argument that individuals could fall back or permanently return to a previous stage, hence they argued that self-change is not linear.

This research combines a mixture of literature drawing on sustainability leadership (see for instance Fry and Egel 2021), Prochaska and DiClemente's (1983) work on behaviour change complemented by Shotter's (2006) withness/aboutness thinking approach. Given the international character of the study, involving global sustainability practitioners from the UK, Canada, France, India, Luxembourg and Germany particular focus will be on the importance of context for sustainability leadership, how contexts can promote and hinder such leadership and what change is required. Overall, this research responds to the need for more research into sustainability leadership and contributes with its practice focus, in line with recommendations made by Egel and Fry's (2021) work.

Methodology

In terms of research design, a case-study approach was chosen to allow qualitative insights into the sustainability leadership of industry leaders in different international contexts. Case studies have value when processual, dynamic phenomena and associated causal links are too complex for quantitative data to capture (Yin, 2009). The purpose is not to achieve generalisability at the level of empirical specifics, but to infer insights that may be more broadly applicable under similar conditions. Qualitative work is also particularly useful when rather little is known about a phenomenon, with the relevant case here being sustainability leadership. Furthermore a multiple case study design allows for comparison and strengthens the reliability of insights. Here we have chosen international cases relevant to the ways in which sustainability leadership could manifest itself in different international contexts. This allows for comparing and contrasting sustainability across international contexts of which little knowledge may be yet available. Furthermore case study research supports theory-building and theory-development, allowing us to explore the relevance of the different theories employed in this study, to make recommendations for further theoretical refinement.

This research study has two phases. In phase 1 an online 2h roundtable was conducted with three international Sustainability Leaders in the UK, France, and Canada, two running their global businesses in sustainability and one being employed as Director for Sustainability with a UK SME. Two companies can be classified as SMEs, one as a micro business. These three case studies provide the empirical foundation for the research. In phase 2 further interviews with the participants have been conducted complementing the data gathered through the roundtable. The roundtable discussion focussed on sustainability leadership, entrepreneurial ways in sustainability leadership and questions of ethics and justice. In the second phase, which is still a work in progress, sustainability leaders are being interviewed in other international contexts using various digital platforms such as Google Meet, Teams or Zoom. These leaders are based in India, Luxembourg and Germany.

Both the roundtable and the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, ie. ethical agreement was sought before the event. The inbuilt transcription tools were used for each platform to arrive at a first draft of a transcript which was then proofread and modified in line with the recording. Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis was used to structure the transcript analysis.

Findings

The findings to date suggest the importance of two important topics, ie intrinsic and extrinsic factors impacting sustainability leadership. On the one hand main themes related to the individual being a global change agent, having the ambition to create a global sustainability mindset, being driven by the ambition to create impact and by a vision of how the present and future should/could look like. The need for resilience and the possibility to forego profit potential to be authentic ie true to one's values emerged too as important theme. Being connected i.e.. part of a global community relating to the sustainability leadership role of the individual and the importance of context were equally important themes emerging from the data. Contextual factors related to the cultural specificities of the countries

including rules and regulations impeding sustainable commerce; prevailing consumer purchasing patterns and greenwashing were emphasised.

The study concludes that Fry and Egel's (2021), complemented by the behaviour change model developed by Prochaska and DiClemente's (1983), has much to offer as a foundation for Sustainability Leadership research. Yet more research is needed to establish what the concept of sustainability leadership is about on a global and local scale, ie. its glocal meaning needs further exploration.

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The hyper-ambiguity of leadership for sustainability

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Abstract

This essay explores how leadership for sustainability can be meaningfully approached even if it is an exceedingly ambiguous notion. Leadership and sustainability can each mean many different things, which makes them easy to use for dubious purposes, such as greenwashing and academic careerism. Combining them creates a risky hyper-ambiguity, with innumerable possible meanings and new opportunities for exploitation. Still, the prospect that some form leadership, such as collective leadership, may play a role in tackling climate change and other global challenges is intriguing enough to be worth investigating. The present paper draws on previous critical discussions of leadership (Alvesson and Blom, 2021; Fairhurst et al., 2020) and sustainability (Amsler, 2009; Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010) as ambiguous concepts. It is also inspired by a recent stream of research on ambiguity as a fundamental and not necessarily negative aspect of organisational life (Eisenberg, 1984; Cappellaro et al., 2023; Guthey and Morsing, 2014). Two main strategies to handle the ambiguity of each concept – conceptual clarity and conceptual openness – are identified and possible combinations are discussed.

Leadership has been defined in terms of behaviours, influence, process, organisational position, interaction patterns, and in several other, fundamentally differing ways (Yukl, 2013: 2-3). It is generally assumed to be about influence, but since it is not clear how it differs from other kinds of influence, such as power or authority, it has been questioned whether leadership is even a meaningful concept (Pfeffer, 1977). This ambiguity carries over to more specific types of leadership, including collective leadership (Fairhurst et al., 2020), which is hard to delineate from coordination, collaboration or organising in general (Denis et al., 2012). Leadership appears to be a hegemonic, broadly applied concept overloaded with positive connotations that researchers can profit from to get grants, publications and citations (Alvesson and Blom, 2021). One strategy to deal with the problematic ambiguity of leadership is to seek more conceptual clarity and to state explicitly what is meant and not mean by it. However, clarity is a relational variable arising not just from the message but between the actors involved (Eisenberg, 1984; Cappellaro et al., 2023), so it cannot be achieved by scholars individually. A different strategy is conceptual openness. From a social constructionist perspective, it makes sense to view leadership as an emergent product of interplay between actors and to study empirically how it is socially constructed in particular contexts (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010).

Sustainability is a policy concept formulated by the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which was concerned with reconciling present and future

human needs and the limitations imposed by nature. The concept has since been re-interpreted as encompassing social, economic and environmental dimensions, which risks obscuring fundamental conflicts between welfare and environmental protection, both on the societal and organisational levels (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010; Ergene et al., 2021). In addition, sustainability is often understood in terms of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2012), which means that it can denote anything from fostering innovation to securing access to education. More conceptual clarity is arguably a necessary prerequisite to engender research and policy that can actually achieve sustainable development (Jacob, 1994), especially since transnational business associations have managed to dodge state-enforced environmental regulation by promoting market-oriented framings of sustainability (Kaplan, 2023). Still, just as with leadership, another strategy is conceptual openness. It implies embracing the ambiguity of sustainability (Amsler, 2009) and corporate social responsibility (Guthey and Morsing, 2014) in order to destabilise common-sense understandings and open up for a plurality of voices and genuinely radical alternatives to the status quo.

Different combinations of conceptual clarity and openness regarding leadership and sustainability are possible, and no combination should be discarded outright. Ambiguity can be strategically misused, but the ethics of a strategy ultimately depends on the ends to which it is used (Eisenberg, 1984). If the hyper-ambiguity of sustainability for leadership is openly acknowledged, it can be handled and even deployed for critical inquiry.

(655 words)

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Proposed Paper Abstract:

Director Activism: Promoting Responsible Climate Leadership in Corporate Governance

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how climate-related disclosure (CRD) is rendered by non-executive directors to understand the practice of climate leadership in corporate governance (Cikaliuk et al, 2022). The focus is on what we call 'Director Activism' which highlights the role of directors to move beyond both their fiduciary duties and risk and compliance frameworks to proactively advocate climate responsibility. Key is how directors influence external stakeholders such as industry, government, citizens, civil society, consumers to galvanise action.

Existing research has not critically examined climate leadership from a corporate governance perspective. Extant studies on climate leadership focus predominantly on governance at global, regional or city scales (Maher et al, 2023). Scholarship on CRD has also neglected the role of leadership and is mostly considered from an accounting, financial and legal perspective (Nyberg & Wright, 2022). Although there is now considerable research on shareholder activism as well as climate activism by NGO organisations, there is a lack of academic analysis on board directors as climate leaders.

This study will contribute to an informed debate on the role of corporate governance in addressing climate change. It will broaden our understanding of directors' duties and ask crucial questions about climate change leadership and shareholder primacy. To date, the specific leadership and governance practices that are required (i.e. how will we *collectively* make this work?) have been largely ignored (Kempster & Jackson, 2021). Such practices require urgent attention as they will take considerable time to identify, develop, and to refine on a local and international scale.

Our empirical study focuses on the formation and growth of Chapter Zero New Zealand (CZNZ), which is one of 24 nation-based chapters instigated by the Climate Governance Initiative (CGI). CGI's mission is to mobilise boards around the world to accelerate the net zero transition, guided by the World Economic Forum's Principles of Effective Climate Governance. The CGI is hosted by the Centre for Climate Engagement which is based at Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge. Most of the national chapters have adopted the Chapter Zero brand, signalling their commitment to support the global to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

In the first year since its inception in March 2022, over 850 New Zealand directors signed up as supporters of CZNZ. The mission of CZNZ is to, 'mobilise, connect, educate and equip directors and boards to make climate-smart governance decisions, thereby creating long-term value for both shareholders and stakeholders'. CZNZ is governed by a Steering Committee of high-profile corporate, social and scientific leaders and is administered by a Working Group made up of representatives from the Institute of Directors (IoD), climate-change advisory groups and other key stakeholders.

To date, we have participated and attended in 12 of the live and webinar events that have featured international climate experts, the Prime Minister, the Minister for Climate Change and the Leader of the Opposition as well as numerous chairs and CEOs of NZ50 companies. We will be presenting data collected from these events as well as CZNZ governance meetings, workshops and consultations. We will conduct approximately 30 interviews with members of the CZNZ Steering and Working Groups as well as other directors who have spoken publicly in CGNZ events.

The principal goal of our research is to understand why and how board directors take an 'activist' stance to leading climate mitigation and adaptation within New Zealand both individually and collectively? Related to this we want to appreciate what it means to be a 'responsible' climate leader in governance roles? Why do some directors take an activist stance to climate versus a risk or compliance-only stance? Finally, we will explore what the political, social and economic consequences could be with directors acting as climate leaders. Should directors only fulfil their fiduciary duties or extend beyond this scope?

We are also examining international differences in the way in which CRD at the corporate governance level is framed in New Zealand and other jurisdictions such as the UK, Australia, Canada, and Singapore (Pinheiro et al, 2022). Who are the key players and organisations at the centre of CRD? What influence do they have? What are the barriers and levers for change? How do these organisations influence the form of climate leadership taking shape in boards?

Bolden et al (2022) have noted that 'Grand Challenges', of which climate action failure is ranked the most severe (WEF, 2023) are special for leadership because they invite a shift in the value-orientation of leaders, to go beyond their organisational roles, to take up responsibilities for wider global convergence, even if this stretches their remit, expertise, or legitimacy. Grand challenges call for leadership that transcends the partitive interest of single organisations, countries, or sectors. They also require a shift of value orientation to concern for an expanded sense of 'we' and the promulgation of 'radical hope' requiring post-heroic leadership.

We will assess the extent to which the CZNZ is both modelling and providing this type of leadership-in-governance. And the extent to which it is engaging in the five 'bridge-building' practices of social change organisations identified by Ospina and Foldy (2010): promoting cognitive shifts in one's group and beyond, so that people no longer see existing structures and divisions as inevitable: naming and shaping a common identity, an 'us'; celebrating diversity; creating equitable governance and weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships.

Smolovic-Jones (2022) notes that climate justice leadership can be made sense of and reconceptualised through a spatial leadership approach which encompasses the 'Global' climate space, the 'National' climate space and the 'Local' climate space. He notes that activists concerned with achieving climate justice can make change happen at all of these scales by targeting centres of power and through co-ordinating their activity locally. While we acknowledge the important work of celebrated climate activists such as Greta Thunberg, in dramatically reconfiguring space for climate justice, we should not ignore the work of 'climate activists' who are based in far more conventional institutional contexts, including board directors, many of whom are members of the business elite.

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The Leadership Dynamics of Systems Change
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Social innovation through collective responsible leadership

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Extended Abstract

This paper explores how social innovation became manifest in a medium sized organization through the development of collective responsible leadership. The organization (to be known here after as CDL) had set up a pilot project to explore a partnership with Her Majesty's Prison Service (HMP) to integrate a long-term prisoner into the organization's warehouse department in readiness for resettlement into society. This was a business decision rather than philanthropic. At the time of the project launch the business had around 80 staff vacancies across the business. The Operations Director (coauthor) and the CEO had been exploring ideas of responsible leadership and the notion of Good Dividends (Kempster, Maak, and Parry, 2019) in terms of how the business could align aspects of social impact that might realise value across a range of stakeholders. It is in this context that the social innovation pilot project of prisoner employment should be understood (Maak, Pless and Voegtlin, 2016). Of particular salience is how the employees embraced this initiative.

Social innovation was understood to be focused on 'the commercial introduction of a new (or improved) product (service), product-service-system, or business model which leads to environmental and/or social benefits' (Hansen and Grosse-Dunker 2013: 2407-2408). There are two interrelated aspects we wish to emphasize – the idea of 'commercial' and the realization of 'social benefits.' These two concepts are seen to be complementary if social innovation is to occur:

value to the organization and value to society. The innovation of employing a long-term prisoner provides potential social benefit but does it provide value to the company? Value to CDL was conceived as so much more than profit; value was assumed to be drawn from multiple sources (Kempster, Maak, and Parry, 2019) namely: employee benefits, reputation and operational benefits, alongside the social value to both the prisoner and to society.

With this frame of value understood the Operations Director (one of the coauthors) framed how measurement of the pilot project would be examined. Of greatest salience would be to the realization (or otherwise) of value to the stakeholders outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 Key Project Stakeholders

Title	Role	Comments / Tasks
Prisoner	Department operative recruit.	Released on licence (>16 years imprisonment).
Buddy	Department operative working 1:1 with the prisoner.	Introduction to site, routines and rituals. Prisoner tacit and explicit knowledge development.
Department Leaders (2)	Manager and supervisor within the warehouse department.	Responsibility for prisoner competency development, department performance and wellbeing. Provide probation reports on prisoner development.
Human Resource Manager	Resource, support and guide employee welfare and personal development.	Responsibility to manage recruitment and prisoner licence conditions maintaining overall organisational wellbeing. Attend prisoner probation meetings and provide regular prisoner social engagement.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders shown in Table 1. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Confidence in the validity of the emerging themes was given through a triangulation between the three key stakeholder groups – the buddy group, the prisoner, and the organisational managers. We outline the key themes in Table 2

Table 2: Thematic Findings

Theme	Stakeholder	Comments
Purpose	Department Manager	‘We’re doing something good for the prisoner helping him come back into normal life, he’s starting from scratch’
	Prisoner	‘Work is reintegrating me back into society with social skills and experiences ... Having money means so much to me when I meet my daughter. I’m

		able to buy her lunch and provide for her something I have never done’
Pre-judgment and acceptance	Buddy Prisoner	‘It was difficult to judge without seeing him first, we are just concerned with how his behaviour would impact us... He’s (the prisoner) very open about crime and prison life, its helped understanding his situation and move forward. We are work friends now and he comes to me when he needs help’. ‘He (Buddy) has taught me everything I know... Even now he will check on me and provide support...He’s become a friend at work’
Personal Development	Department leader Prisoner	‘He (Buddy) has grown in confidence overcoming some personal challenges. He’s now looking for progression within the department and volunteered to support future prisoners’ ‘I’m at work all day with the purpose of having enough money for a small flat’...’I’m considering relocating here as I have the future employment offer’...‘This is more than a job to me it’s giving me so many skills to help integrate back into society. It’s been fantastic and I’m thankful of the opportunity’
Change Management	HR Manager	‘The warehouse team have all become positive change agents, supporting concerns and providing reassurance elsewhere as we look at other departments in the business’ ‘Who knows who you are next too in society and you never

	Employee (outside warehouse)	know what they have done. I'm grateful you have taken the time to speak with me. I don't feel threatened by the prisoner being here'
Recruitment	HM Prison Liaison Officer	'Throughout his time at [CDL] I have seen a positive change in the Prisoner. He has gained confidence and comes across as a lot happier and more settled. He has also spoken about his release plans when he gets his parole'
	Prisoner	'A couple of people [Prisoners] come to see me last night because there's a few more advertisements gone up for this place [CDL] within the prison. They asked me what it was like and what type of work we do. They are alright, I mean they're my age and sensible''
	Supervisor	'The current inmate is acting as an ambassador for both the prison service and CDL'
	Department manager	'I found the prisoner far more engaged and committed to self-development than I expected'

At the conference we intend to unpack the implications of the findings outlined in Table 2. In short the findings make explicit how through purpose-led leadership and employee stewardship engagement multi-level stakeholder value was realised. For example, the prisoner rapidly developed his competency demonstrating the ability and commitment required by the department community. A buddy role was utilised to provide shadowing experiential learning for the prisoner imparting explicit and tacit knowledge. The process provided the buddy with focus and purpose in his role. The buddy demonstrated personal development which he recognised through self-reflection. Departmental members observed and experienced growth in the buddy capabilities. The department experienced an appreciation of community spirit working collaboratively with shared objective identity – there was strikingly greater employee sense of meaningful work. Indeed CDL did not really understand how best to manage and integrate the initial prisoner. It was the warehouse team, once overcoming initial fear and preconceived judgment, rallied around to support and engage with the ‘purposeful’ activity that was modifying and enriching the workplace

community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002) around a more explicit sense of shared purpose.

CDL has reviewed the project and the business case is thus:

1. Buddy system – CDL has now changed its buddying system to adopt the practice pioneered with the prisoner on-boarding was faster than the ‘standard’ method meaning productivity of the prisoner increased quicker than usual and the quality of output increased
2. Purpose-in-practice – purpose is now better understood with a clear line of sight by seeing and feeling purpose has greater meaning. Employee engagement has risen.
3. Staff retention – churn rate has decreased by two people per month saving an estimated £10,000 per person with an annual projection of £250,000.
4. Vacancies have fallen to 40 (at the time of writing) with measureable less employee ‘churn’
5. Success of the pilot has now led to 6 prisoners now being employed across different departments.
6. CDL now has more robust recruitment and induction processes and key learning in recruiting people from paths of disadvantage – CDL is now working with charities on recruiting homeless people (first jobs back into the workplace) and recovered addicts (chances of employment are as low as convicted sex offenders).

This is very different to traditional CSR. The social innovation enacted in CDL offer insight into a different form of enacting business in the form of seeking to pursue and integrate multiple shareholder value (Kempster and Jackson, 2021). It is of course anecdotal but the significant opportunities of aligning social impact with value generation illustrated in this research provide intriguing possibilities for leadership research. At the conference we intend to pick up on this point and the opportunities for broader systems change, with regard to policy and practice drawn from this case study.

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