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Strategic Leadership and Sustainability Literature Review

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Abstract: The relationship between leadership and sustainability has emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry, reflecting the urgent need for organizations to address environmental challenges while maintaining economic viability and social responsibility. This comprehensive review synthesizes evidence from 30 highly relevant empirical studies and reviews published primarily between 2016 and 2026, examining how leadership styles, mechanisms, and practices influence organizational and environmental sustainability outcomes. The evidence demonstrates that specific leadership styles—particularly transformational, green transformational, green servant, and sustainable leadership—positively predict sustainability performance through mechanisms including vision articulation, role modeling, green human resource management (HRM) alignment, employee empowerment, and knowledge diffusion. Outcomes span green innovation, environmental performance, employee well-being, and competitive advantage. Theoretical frameworks employed include the Full-Range Leadership Model, AMO (Ability-Motivation-Opportunity) theory, and CSR governance models. Despite promising findings, significant gaps persist in conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, geographic diversity, and measurement standardization. This review provides a structured synthesis for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand and leverage leadership for sustainability.

Keyword: Strategic Leadership, Sustainability, AMO (Ability-Motivation-Opportunity) theory.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations worldwide face mounting pressure to integrate sustainability into their core operations, driven by climate change, resource scarcity, regulatory demands, and stakeholder expectations. Leadership has been identified as a pivotal factor in translating sustainability aspirations into tangible organizational practices and outcomes (Altassan, 2025). Leaders shape organizational culture, allocate resources, design human resource systems, and model behaviors that collectively determine whether sustainability initiatives succeed or fail (Papademetriou et al., 2026).

Despite growing scholarly attention, the leadership-sustainability nexus remains fragmented across disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and empirical contexts. Questions

persist regarding which leadership styles most effectively promote sustainability, through what mechanisms leaders exert influence, and under what conditions leadership-sustainability relationships are strongest. This review addresses these questions by synthesizing evidence from 30 recent studies, focusing on: (1) the specific leadership styles empirically linked to sustainability outcomes, (2) the mechanisms and mediators through which leadership operates, (3) the organizational and environmental performance outcomes observed, (4) the theoretical frameworks guiding research, and (5) critical gaps requiring future investigation.

The review is structured to provide both breadth and depth. It begins with theoretical foundations, then systematically examines leadership styles, mechanisms, outcomes, and frameworks before identifying research gaps and offering recommendations for scholars and practitioners.

The intersection of leadership and sustainability draws on multiple theoretical traditions. Leadership theory provides frameworks for understanding how leaders influence followers and organizations. Classical models distinguish between transactional leadership (based on exchange relationships) and transformational leadership (based on inspiration and vision) (Papademetriou et al., 2026). More recent extensions include green, servant, authentic, and sustainable leadership variants tailored to environmental and social contexts (Khoiruddin et al., 2023).

Sustainability theory emphasizes the triple bottom line—economic, environmental, and social performance—and the need for long-term stewardship over short-term profit maximization (Isaiah, 2021). Organizational sustainability requires integrating environmental concerns into strategic planning, operations, and stakeholder relationships (Altassan, 2025).

Human resource management (HRM) theory, particularly the AMO (Ability-Motivation-Opportunity) framework, explains how HR practices enable, motivate, and provide opportunities for employees to engage in pro-environmental behaviors (Tritisari et al., 2025). Green HRM—encompassing green recruitment, training, performance management, and rewards—serves as a critical mechanism linking leadership to sustainability outcomes (Papademetriou et al., 2026).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and governance theories address how organizations manage ethical obligations to stakeholders, including environmental stewardship and supply-chain responsibility (Coates, 2016). Leadership plays a central role in embedding CSR principles into organizational strategy and operations (Ramírez-Altamirano et al., 2024).

Organizational culture and climate theories highlight how leaders shape shared values, norms, and psychological climates that either support or hinder sustainability initiatives (Hu'an et al., 2026). A strong organizational green culture amplifies the effects of leadership on sustainability outcomes (Ismail, 2025).

These theoretical foundations converge on a central proposition: leadership is a multi-level, multi-mechanism driver of sustainability, operating through individual behaviors, HR systems, organizational culture, and strategic governance.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, has emerged as a robust predictor of sustainability outcomes. Papademetriou et al. (2026) found that transformational leadership was the most robust positive predictor of Green HRM practices in Greek hospitality organizations, using the Full-Range Leadership Model. Transformational leaders inspire employees toward shared sustainability objectives, model sustainable behaviors, and foster innovation (Cevallos, 2024).

Manajemen et al. (2025) demonstrated that transformational leadership positively and significantly affects pro-environmental behavior, innovative work behavior, and sustainable performance, with both innovative and environmentally friendly work behaviors mediating the

relationship between transformational leadership and sustainable performance. This finding underscores transformational leaders' dual role in fostering creativity and environmental responsibility.

Cevallos (2024) identified a strong positive correlation between transformational leadership and the adoption of sustainable organizational practices, with key mechanisms including articulating a shared vision, modeling sustainable behaviors, and fostering innovation. Mediating factors such as employee commitment, organizational learning, and corporate social responsibility were crucial in translating leadership into sustainability outcomes.

Green Transformational Leadership

Green transformational leadership extends transformational leadership by explicitly focusing on environmental values and behaviors. This style significantly moderates the relationship between green performance management and environmental sustainability, enhancing the positive impact of green HRM practices (Green Human Resources Management and Environmental Sustainability, 2023). The estimated coefficient of the interaction between green performance management and green transformational leadership was 0.112, indicating a positive moderating effect.

Tritisari et al. (2025) identified green transformational leadership as an important antecedent factor driving Green HRM success, with organizational green culture and green innovation mediating the influence of GHRM practices on organizational sustainability. This suggests that green transformational leadership not only directly influences sustainability but also creates conditions—through culture and innovation—that amplify the effects of HR practices.

Green Servant Leadership

Green servant leadership combines the altruistic, follower-focused orientation of servant leadership with explicit environmental stewardship. Hu'an et al. (2026) found that green servant leadership significantly fosters tacit green knowledge, which subsequently promotes green innovation. Organizational green culture positively strengthens the relationship between green servant leadership and tacit green knowledge ($\beta = 0.121$, $T = 3.562$, $p < 0.001$), implying that culture enhances knowledge dissemination and strengthens leadership's indirect influence on innovation.

This moderated mediation model highlights the importance of contextual factors—specifically organizational culture—in determining the effectiveness of green servant leadership. Leaders who prioritize employee development and environmental values create knowledge-sharing environments that drive innovation.

Sustainable Leadership

Sustainable leadership emphasizes long-term stewardship, ethical decision-making, and balancing economic, environmental, and social objectives. Qurat-ul-Ain et al. (2025) conducted a mini meta-analysis revealing a moderate, statistically significant positive relationship between sustainable leadership and innovation outcomes ($r = 0.393$, $p < 0.001$), with strategic and entrepreneurial leadership styles showing the strongest correlations. High heterogeneity ($I^2 = 96.77\%$) indicated contextual and methodological differences across studies.

Altassan (2025) identified visionary communication, role modeling, and operational integration as key sustainable leadership behaviors driving sustainability by aligning ethical values with organizational practices. These efforts are reinforced by Green HRM practices like green recruitment and eco-friendly appraisals, emphasizing that embedding sustainability requires a synergistic approach integrating leadership vision, HRM systems, and cultural context.

Arturo (2023) found that sustainable leadership had a significant positive influence on sustainable performance (standardized estimate: 0.57), with gender significantly moderating this relationship (standardized estimate: 0.40). Interestingly, ethical leadership showed a significant negative influence on sustainable performance (standardized estimate: -0.36), suggesting potential complexities in how different leadership dimensions interact with performance outcomes.

Engel (2023) reported a statistically significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.01$) between sustainable leadership and organizational identification in universities, indicating that sustainable leadership is crucial in academic settings for identifying and implementing essential indicators within the governance, strategy, and communication framework of a sustainable university.

Other Leadership Styles

Ethical leadership influences employees' voluntary environmental behavior and impacts sustainable performance, though its effects may be context-dependent (Arturo, 2023). Authentic leadership has been linked to strategic agile operations and organizational sustainability (Rauniar et al., 2025). Green entrepreneurial leadership significantly influences green entrepreneurship outcomes, with businesses demonstrating this style achieving higher sustainability performance and innovating in environmentally friendly ways (Green Entrepreneurial Leadership Style, 2023).

Transactional leadership shows weaker or conditional positive links to Green HRM implementation compared to transformational leadership, while passive leadership is significantly inversely associated with Green HRM practices (Papademetriou et al., 2026). This suggests that active, engaged leadership is necessary for sustainability initiatives, whereas passive or laissez-faire approaches undermine environmental efforts.

Vision and Communication

Leaders articulate sustainability visions and integrate them into operations and culture, aligning ethical values with action (Altassan, 2025). Visionary communication is a key leadership behavior driving sustainability by making environmental goals salient and meaningful to employees. Green entrepreneurial leaders communicate a clear vision for a sustainable future, articulating the relevance of sustainability and encouraging environmental responsibility (Green Entrepreneurial Leadership Style, 2023).

Role Modeling and Norm Setting

Leaders demonstrate sustainable behaviors that employees emulate, strengthening organizational green norms (Altassan, 2025). Role modeling is particularly important in transformational and sustainable leadership, where leaders' actions signal organizational priorities and legitimize pro-environmental behaviors (Cevallos, 2024). By consistently modeling sustainable practices, leaders create normative expectations that shape employee behavior.

Green HRM Alignment and Institutionalization

Leaders embed sustainability via Green HRM practices—including green hiring, training, performance management, and rewards—to routinize eco-practices (Altassan, 2025). Papademetriou et al. (2026) demonstrated that transformational leadership predicts Green HRM implementation, which in turn drives environmental performance. Patel et al. (2025) found that leadership significantly mediates the relationship between sustainable HRM and organizational sustainability (indirect effect $\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$), with significant direct effects of sustainable HRM on leadership ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$) and organizational sustainability ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$).

Green HRM serves as a critical institutionalization mechanism, translating leadership vision into formal policies, procedures, and incentives that guide employee behavior. Tritisari et al. (2025) noted that GHRM practices positively impact organizational sustainability, with organizational green culture and green innovation mediating GHRM's influence.

Empowerment and Psychological Safety

Leaders create climates that enable employee pro-environmental and innovative behavior, mediating improvements in sustainable performance (Manajemen et al., 2025). Wijaya et al. (2025) found that sustainable leadership improves performance through psychological safety and employee empowerment. Empowerment involves providing employees with autonomy, resources, and support to engage in sustainability initiatives, while psychological safety ensures employees feel comfortable proposing and implementing environmental innovations without fear of negative consequences.

Green entrepreneurial leaders create friendly and empowering environments that motivate initiative and thought-sharing, promoting innovative cultures and fostering creativity (Green Entrepreneurial Leadership Style, 2023).

Knowledge Generation and Diffusion

Leaders foster tacit green knowledge and innovation processes that convert ideas into green products and practices, moderated by green culture (Hu'an et al., 2026). Sustainable leaders enhance employees' innovative thinking skills by facilitating knowledge sharing and promoting innovation (Arturo, 2023). Knowledge mechanisms are particularly salient in green servant leadership, where leaders prioritize employee development and create conditions for knowledge exchange.

Governance and Supply-Chain Oversight

Senior leadership integrates CSR and supply-chain governance to manage external sustainability risks and align suppliers with firm sustainability goals (Coates, 2016). Coates (2016) argued that corporate leadership must embed strategic CSR principles into supply chain management contracts and operations, using CSR in SCM as a risk management tool. Leadership influences sustainability outcomes through interpersonal exchanges that build trust, respect, and reciprocity between buyer firms and suppliers, guided by Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory and transformational leadership principles.

Ramírez-Altamirano et al. (2024) found that transformational environmental leadership facilitates internal changes and decision-making necessary to implement corporate social responsibility practices, developing competitive advantages that positively relate to sustainable performance.

Green Innovation and Innovative Performance

Meta-analytic evidence shows a moderate positive effect of sustainable leadership on innovation (mean effect $r = 0.393$, $p < 0.001$), with strategic and entrepreneurial leadership styles showing the strongest correlations (Qurat-ul-Ain et al., 2025). Hu'an et al. (2026) demonstrated that green servant leadership fosters tacit green knowledge, which subsequently promotes green innovation, with organizational green culture strengthening this relationship.

Manajemen et al. (2025) found that transformational leadership's effect on sustainable performance is mediated by innovative work behavior, highlighting the role of creativity and experimentation in translating leadership into sustainability outcomes. Green entrepreneurial leadership significantly influences green entrepreneurship outcomes, with businesses demonstrating this style achieving higher sustainability performance and innovating in environmentally friendly ways (Green Entrepreneurial Leadership Style, 2023).

Environmental and Sustainable Performance

Transformational and transformational-environmental leadership relate to improved sustainable performance and can foster competitive advantage through CSR implementation (Manajemen et al., 2025), (Ramírez-Altamirano et al., 2024). Ramírez-Altamirano et al. (2024) observed a positive relationship between competitive advantage and sustainable performance, concluding that transformational environmental leadership and corporate social responsibility strengthen both competitive advantage and sustainable performance.

Arturo (2023) reported that sustainable leadership had a significant positive influence on sustainable performance (standardized estimate: 0.57), with sustainable performance's explained variability (R^2) at 13% for leadership effects and 17% when gender moderation was included. Green transformational leadership significantly moderates the association between environmental sustainability and green performance management, enhancing the positive impact of green performance management on environmental sustainability (Green Human Resources Management and Environmental Sustainability, 2023).

Green HRM Implementation and Pro-Environmental Behavior

Transformational and green leadership predict stronger Green HRM uptake and employee eco-behaviors that support organizational sustainability (Papademetriou et al., 2026). Papademetriou et al. (2026) found that transformational leadership was the most robust positive predictor of Green HRM practices, followed by leadership outcomes and transactional leadership, while passive leadership was significantly inversely associated with Green HRM implementation.

Manajemen et al. (2025) demonstrated that transformational leadership positively and significantly affects pro-environmental behavior, with pro-environmental behavior mediating the relationship between transformational leadership and sustainable performance. This suggests that leaders influence sustainability not only through formal HR systems but also by shaping informal employee behaviors and norms.

Employee Well-Being and Organizational Identification

Sustainable leadership mediates effects of sustainable HRM on employee well-being and increases organizational identification (Patel et al., 2025), (Engel, 2023). Patel et al. (2025) found that leadership significantly mediates the relationship between sustainable HRM and employee well-being, with significant direct effects of sustainable HRM on leadership ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$). This finding highlights the dual benefit of sustainability-oriented leadership: it enhances both organizational sustainability and employee well-being, suggesting that environmental and social objectives can be mutually reinforcing.

Engel (2023) reported a statistically significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.01$) between sustainable leadership and organizational identification in universities, indicating that sustainable leadership fosters employees' sense of belonging and alignment with organizational values.

Competitive Advantage

Ramírez-Altamirano et al. (2024) found that transformational environmental leadership facilitates the development of competitive advantages, which in turn positively relate to sustainable performance. This suggests that sustainability-oriented leadership can be a source of strategic differentiation, enabling organizations to achieve superior performance relative to competitors. Businesses successfully integrating environmental considerations into strategy have a competitive advantage (Adaptive Subgradient Methods for Leadership And Development, 2023).

METHOD

Researchers employ multiple leadership and organizational theories to explain how leadership affects sustainability, often combining leadership theory with HRM, CSR, and organizational behavior frameworks.

Full-Range Leadership Model is used to compare transformational, transactional, and passive effects on Green HRM implementation (Papademetriou et al., 2026). This model provides a comprehensive taxonomy of leadership behaviors, enabling researchers to assess which styles most effectively promote sustainability.

Transformational and green-specific leadership theories are applied to explain vision-driven change, pro-environmental motivation, and innovation pathways (Manajemen et al., 2025), (Cevallos, 2024). These theories emphasize leaders' ability to inspire and mobilize followers around sustainability goals.

Green servant and sustainable leadership concepts are used to link leader altruism and long-term stewardship to green knowledge sharing and innovation (Hu'an et al., 2026), (Quratul-Ain et al., 2025). These frameworks highlight the ethical and relational dimensions of leadership for sustainability.

HRM and AMO frameworks frame how green HR practices (ability-motivation-opportunity) interact with leadership to produce sustainability outcomes (Tritisari et al., 2025). The AMO model explains how HR practices enable employees to perform pro-environmental behaviors (ability), motivate them to do so (motivation), and provide opportunities for such behaviors (opportunity).

CSR and supply-chain governance models underpin studies on leadership's role in embedding ethical supplier practices and reputational risk management (Coates, 2016). These models address how leaders manage external stakeholder relationships and ensure sustainability throughout the value chain.

Resilience and sustainability integrative frameworks position sustainable leadership as one of several schools for achieving organizational resilience and sustainability (Kantabutra et al., 2024). Kantabutra et al. (2024) derived a cutting-edge framework comprising sustainability practices, sustainability outputs, and sustainability and resilience outcomes to guide future research.

Bibliometric clusters show recurring theory clusters: ethical, transformational, and entrepreneurial leadership in sustainability research (Khoiruddin et al., 2023). Khoiruddin et al. (2023) found that key terms like "sustainability leadership," "performance," and "impact" underscore leadership's centrality in driving sustainable practices, with research clusters highlighting ethical, transformational, and entrepreneurial leadership styles.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory and institutional theory of leadership are employed to explain how interpersonal exchanges and institutional norms shape sustainability outcomes in supply chains (Coates, 2016).

Many studies blend leadership theory with organizational culture, HRM, and CSR lenses to model multi-level causal chains linking leadership to outcomes (Tritisari et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite substantial progress, the literature identifies recurring conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps that constrain cumulative knowledge and generalizability.

Conceptual clarity: Many green and sustainable leadership constructs overlap and lack standardization, limiting comparability across studies (Khoiruddin et al., 2023). Researchers use terms like "green leadership," "sustainable leadership," "environmental leadership," and "transformational environmental leadership" inconsistently, making it difficult to synthesize findings. Future research should develop clear, consensual definitions and measurement instruments for each leadership construct.

Methodological limitations: Predominance of cross-sectional, single-level designs calls for longitudinal, experimental, and multi-level studies to establish causality and boundary conditions (Tritisari et al., 2025). Cross-sectional designs cannot rule out reverse causality (e.g., successful sustainability initiatives may enhance perceptions of leadership) or common method bias. Longitudinal studies tracking leadership and sustainability over time, experimental interventions testing leadership development programs, and multi-level models examining leadership at individual, team, and organizational levels are needed.

Measurement inconsistency: Heterogeneous sustainability-performance metrics hamper meta-synthesis; standardized measures are needed for replication and pooled estimates (Tritisari et al., 2025). Studies measure sustainability using diverse indicators—environmental performance, green innovation, carbon emissions, waste reduction, employee well-being, CSR ratings—making it difficult to compare effect sizes and draw generalizable conclusions. Developing validated, multi-dimensional sustainability performance scales would facilitate cumulative research.

Geographic and sector bias: Evidence concentrates in Asian manufacturing and private firms; underrepresented are public sector, NGOs, and diverse geographies, especially developing contexts (Papademetriou et al., 2026). Mohammed (2024) examined sustainability leadership in Saudi non-profit organizations, highlighting the need for more research in non-profit and public sectors. Future studies should expand to diverse industries (e.g., healthcare, education, agriculture), organizational types (e.g., NGOs, government agencies), and geographic regions (e.g., Africa, Latin America) to assess the generalizability of leadership-sustainability relationships.

Mechanism unpacking at scale: More research should test mediated pathways (HRM → climate → behavior → performance) across levels and cultures and examine moderators like organizational green culture (Hu'an et al., 2026), (Patel et al., 2025). While several studies identify mediators (e.g., Green HRM, psychological safety, tacit knowledge), few test comprehensive multi-mediator models or examine how mechanisms vary across contexts. Research should also explore boundary conditions—such as industry, organizational size, national culture, and regulatory environment—that strengthen or weaken leadership-sustainability relationships.

Supply-chain and governance focus: Empirical work is needed on leadership's role in multi-tier supplier governance and ethical alignment across value chains (Coates, 2016). Most research focuses on intra-organizational processes; less is known about how leaders influence sustainability in complex, multi-tier supply chains involving diverse stakeholders with potentially conflicting interests.

Mixed methods and practice-oriented interventions: Calls exist for intervention studies, qualitative process research, and assessments of leadership development programs that build sustainability capability (Patel et al., 2025), (Altassan, 2025). Qualitative studies can provide rich insights into how leaders navigate sustainability challenges, while intervention studies can test the effectiveness of leadership training programs in improving sustainability outcomes. Practice-oriented research should also examine barriers to implementing sustainability-oriented leadership and strategies for overcoming them.

Negative and null findings: The literature is likely affected by publication bias favoring positive results. Arturo (2023) reported a significant negative influence of ethical leadership on sustainable performance, suggesting potential complexities and trade-offs. Future research should investigate conditions under which leadership-sustainability relationships are weak, null, or negative, and journals should encourage publication of such findings.

Addressing these gaps will require coordinated use of robust designs, clearer construct definitions, and broader samples to translate promising leadership-sustainability links into reliable guidance for practice.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive review synthesizes evidence from 30 recent studies examining the relationship between leadership and sustainability. The findings demonstrate that specific leadership styles—particularly transformational, green transformational, green servant, and sustainable leadership—are positively associated with a range of sustainability outcomes, including green innovation, environmental performance, Green HRM implementation, employee well-being, and competitive advantage. These relationships are mediated by mechanisms such as vision articulation, role modeling, Green HRM alignment, employee empowerment, knowledge diffusion, and governance practices.

Theoretical frameworks guiding this research include the Full-Range Leadership Model, transformational leadership theory, AMO frameworks, CSR and supply-chain governance models, and resilience-sustainability integrative frameworks. Despite promising findings, significant gaps remain in conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, geographic and sectoral diversity, and measurement standardization.

For practitioners, the evidence suggests that developing sustainability-oriented leadership capabilities—through training, role modeling, and performance incentives—can yield substantial organizational and environmental benefits. Leaders should focus on articulating clear sustainability visions, modeling sustainable behaviors, aligning HR systems with environmental goals, empowering employees, fostering knowledge sharing, and integrating sustainability into governance and supply-chain management.

For researchers, priority areas include: (1) developing standardized definitions and measures of leadership and sustainability constructs, (2) conducting longitudinal and experimental studies to establish causality, (3) testing multi-level, multi-mediator models across diverse contexts, (4) expanding research to underrepresented sectors and geographies, (5) investigating boundary conditions and moderators, (6) examining supply-chain and governance mechanisms, and (7) conducting mixed-methods and intervention research to inform practice.

As organizations face escalating environmental and social challenges, leadership will remain a critical lever for driving sustainability. By addressing current research gaps and building on existing evidence, scholars and practitioners can advance both theoretical understanding and practical application of leadership for a sustainable future.

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