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Sustainability managers as leaders

Perspectives on leadership at the front line of sustainable business development

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Abstract

In response to increasing breadth and detail of reporting requirements and the broadening range of issues now included under a sustainability umbrella, companies world-wide, including companies in the construction industry, are under pressure to integrate sustainability into organizational activities. Such transition requires empowered leadership for sustainability and fundamental changes to existing business models or the creation of new models for sustainability.

Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with sustainability managers to critically examine the nature of sustainability leadership by focusing on the practices and perspectives of sustainability managers in the Swedish construction industry.

Guided by structuration theory, which advocates duality between agency and structure, this thesis advances the understanding of how sustainability managers' leadership is shaped by ongoing negotiation within established structures and shifting mandates. Sustainability managers' leadership strategies entail promoting sustainability vertically by bringing everybody on board and horizontally by reaching out to individuals in executive roles, as well as finding ambassadors who support their efforts toward raising engagement. Looking ahead, sustainability managers anticipate two non-exclusive futures for sustainability management roles: specialization and democratization. They anticipate leading increasingly specialized expert roles as qualified generalists in the *specialization* future. In the *democratization* future they anticipate their leadership to focus on facilitating the broad distribution of sustainability responsibilities across organizational actors. Furthermore, sustainability leaders reveal a spectrum of perspectives on business models for sustainability, ranging from idealistic to pragmatic and ambiguous. The findings reveal that business models for sustainability thinking remains immature among sustainability leaders. This thesis concludes that sustainability managers are still expected to be front line professionals for sustainable business development.

Key words: sustainability managers, sustainability leadership, sustainability leaders, business development, construction industry, structuration theory

List of included papers

- Kłopotek, D., Gluch, P., Troje D. and Hellsvik, S. *Creating momentum for environmental sustainability: Strategies employed by sustainability managers*, Presented as working paper at the ARCOM conference in September 2024 in Bath, UK.

- Kłopotek, D., Troje, D. and Gluch, P. *Projecting sustainability management: Anticipated futures of specialization and democratization*. Working paper presented at the PROS conference in June 2025 in Eretria, Greece. Developed into a manuscript to be submitted to a journal.

- Kłopotek, D. and Gluch, P. *Pursuing Values for and Beyond Profit: Sustainability Managers' Perspectives on Business Models for Sustainability*. Presented at the ARCOM conference in September 2025 in Dundee, UK. Developed into a manuscript to be submitted to a journal.

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Dominika Kłopotek
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1. Introduction

In this chapter the background to the research is outlined. Following the research aim and research purpose are presented, as well as the research scope.

1.1 Background and problem formulation

Organizations are the primary actors capable of advancing sustainable development (Opoku et al., 2015; Tabares et al., 2021), so without the full engagement of businesses, achieving sustainability goals is impossible (Clune and Zehnder, 2020). Simultaneously, the need to integrate sustainability into organizational activities is increasing. Moreover, organization's success is no longer evaluated solely based on financial performance. Thus, as organizations move beyond evaluating success purely in financial terms, the active involvement of sustainability managers in raising sustainability awareness among stakeholders, as well as in developing sustainability within organizations, has become increasingly important.

Roughly 15 years ago, Greenwood et al. (2012) in their study on environmental managers' role in advancing sustainability emphasized that approximately 50% of them reported to have played a role in raising awareness of sustainability among stakeholders. Since then, the perception of sustainability and its importance to business have undergone considerable change. The conversation has shifted from a mismatch between economy and sustainability to the recognition that economic systems and market players must be aligned with the goals of sustainable development (Clune and Zehnder, 2020). Under pressure from regulations and various stakeholders such as government, investors, insurance companies, customers and employees, companies have acknowledged that sustainability is tightly linked to their long-term success (Bakker et al., 2024) and have begun to place greater emphasis on environmental and social sustainability as they strive towards economic sustainability (Moshood et al., 2024; Pasmar et al., 2025). With arising awareness of sustainability in society and its critical importance for business survival and performance, the number of pressing issues demanding immediate action and transformation at both organizational and industry sector levels is increasing. It has been noted that organizations should strive for elevating goals beyond profit (Battilana et al., 2022). In addition, engagement in sustainability sound efforts has become established as a means for organizations to protect their license to operate (Robinson et al., 2011).

Hence, sustainability and doing business become increasingly integral (Sajjad et al., 2015). As a result, organizational changes are needed to challenge organizational modus operandi towards a sustainable one. However, Nawaz and Koç (2018), drawing on findings from the United Nations Global Compact report surveying over 1000 CEOs on business sustainability, observed that while most executives agree that companies should set the standard in achieving sustainability objectives, sustainability continues to be underemphasized within organizational business models and operational practices.

Reflecting on definitions of sustainability, Aarseth et al. (2017) noted that from over hundred definitions presented, most highlighted the interrelation between humans and the resources they use, thereby aligning with the definition provided by Brundtland Commission (1987)

where sustainable development is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Aarseth et al. (2017), discussed ambiguity around the concept of sustainability and how this ambiguity can be exploited through opportunistic interpretations, allowing sustainability claims to be made without challenging the status quo or underlying agendas. On the other hand, Kemp and Martens (2007) argue that the advantage of flexible interpretation of sustainability is that it enables diverse actors across society to participate in fostering locally tailored solutions. Nonetheless, while sustainability as a concept remains ambiguous, the scope of sustainability continues to expand. The complexity of sustainability is increasing, not only because of new sustainability regulations and taxonomies (e.g., Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive or the EU-Taxonomy) which require strong reporting skills and legal proficiency, but also due to the broadening range of issues now included under sustainability umbrella. Lately, climate change has received much attention and is likely to remain central concern but will also share the spotlight with other issues such as biodiversity (Naeem et al., 2016), soil contamination and degradation (Telo da Gama, 2023) or water related issues (Sangamnere et al., 2023).

Another element needed to embrace the challenge of sustainable development is to change organizations' current business models (Tideman et al., 2013). Business models describe how an organization's strategy is put into practice (Rauter at al., 2017) and therefore, organizational business models must reflect strategies to meet social, environmental and economic sustainability (Fonseca et al., 2021). Designing new business models, so that they approach value creation as the overarching contributions organizations seek to make (Lüdeke et al., 2024), is a prerequisite to this integration (Robinson et al., 2011). Schaltegger et al., (2016) defined business model for sustainability as *"(i) a company's sustainable value proposition to its customers and all other stakeholders, (ii) how it creates and delivers this value, (iii) and how it captures economic value while maintaining or regenerating natural, social, and economic capital beyond its organizational boundaries"* (p. 6). Conducting multiple case study research, Rauter et al. (2017) found that leadership, along with legal regulations, organizational culture, and coherent corporate strategy with sustainability principles, plays a critical role in incorporating sustainability in business models.

The changes described above have implications for sustainability managers' work. Sustainability managers will need to collaborate more extensively, both with specialists in particular sustainability topics as well as with other departments across an organization. Research on the consequences of sustainability reporting mandates, drawing on evidence from the EU-Taxonomy regulation, shows that such mandates necessitate close collaboration between sustainability managers and financial managers (Hummel and Bauernhofer, 2024). By extension, the increasing breadth and detail of reporting requirements demand specialized expertise and greater coordination and interdisciplinary collaboration across an organization. In effect, sustainability management faces similar challenges to those experienced during the implementation of Environment Management Systems during the early 2000'ies (Gluch et al., 2013a). This suggests that despite the considerable amount of time that has passed since the introduction of EMS, sustainability managers are having similar struggles now, in response to

Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the broadening of sustainability issues.

The increasing importance of sustainability performance contributes to a growing demand for leadership that fully acknowledges sustainability. In the 2021 report, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development emphasized importance of organizational leadership for sustainability transition stating: *"Transformation requires an unprecedented level of leadership"*. A study by Wiengarten et al. (2017) demonstrated that the inclusion of sustainability expertise in top management teams by appointing a chief of CSR (corporate social responsibility) improved companies' financial performance and positively impacted companies' image. However, the role of sustainability leaders is complex as it incorporates multiple challenges and thus is confined to multiple and oftentimes contradictory organizational pressures (Sajjad et al., 2024).

Sustainability leaders can be defined as *"The person who motivates and influences followers in order to overcome sustainability barriers and address sustainability challenges, guaranteeing that society meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"* (Eustachio et al., 2023, p. 7). This definition outlines three functions that navigated this research. The first is motivational, emphasizing the importance of inspiring and engaging others in collective efforts. The second is problem-solving, focusing on how obstacles are addressed and challenges overcome. Finally, the third is forward-looking, highlighting the need to respond to current demands while also considering the interests of future generations. This perspective on sustainability leadership implies that sustainability leaders need to act and think differently.

Research on leadership for sustainability often emphasizes leaders' personal traits, behavior (Derue et al., 2011) and characteristics (Waldman and Siegel, 2008), as well as their leadership styles (Zhao et al., 2016). However, these studies often simplify the actual leadership work performed, as focus often is placed solely on the leaders' persona without granting sufficient account to organizational complexity and always present competing institutional logics from which actors can draw (Tourish, 2018). The ongoing debate in management studies about leadership typologies and styles reveals that different approaches to studying leadership are necessary to contribute to leadership theory and practice (Alvesson et al., 2017, Whyte et al., 2025). For example, Alvesson et al. (2017) emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in both the study and practice of leadership, whereas Whyte et al. (2025) suggest that researchers interested in investigating leadership should put greater emphasis on leadership practices and interactions.

Tourish (2014) critically examined leadership, specifically the agency of a leader which is oftentimes assumed to be absolute. A conclusion made by Tourish (2014) is the need for alternative approaches to studying and thinking of leadership. Specifically, the author suggests focusing on active enactment of leadership, that is what leaders do, believe or intend to do (ibidem). In this vein, Boeske (2023) stresses that leadership is goal-directed and action-oriented and highlights that sustainability leaders are responsible for guiding other actors towards achieving organizational sustainability goals. These perspectives highlight the

importance of understanding how leadership is put into practice. Therefore, in this thesis, the focus is placed on examining how leadership for sustainability is enacted, that is what sustainability managers do as leaders for sustainability within their respective organizations.

1.2 Aim and research questions

Following the call by Tourish (2014) to investigate what leaders do, believe and intend to do, the aim of this thesis is to examine and critically reflect on the leadership for sustainability. Specifically, the focus is on sustainability managers' practices, strategies and perspectives on sustainability work they perform to embed sustainability at the core of business development. This investigation is informed by the lens of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), which provides theoretical foundation for analyzing how sustainability managers both shape and are shaped by the organizational structures in which they operate. This thesis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do sustainability leaders develop work strategies to align strategic development processes with sustainability goals?

RQ2: How do sustainability leaders anticipate the evolution of their leadership in response to increased demands on corporate sustainability performance?

2. Context of the study

Environmental conditions, or context, influence both leadership functioning and sustainability-related decision-making (Sajjad et al., 2024). Therefore, since the contextual setting of this research is the construction industry, the next section examines this industry's characteristics from a sustainability perspective.

2.1 The construction industry and sustainability

The construction industry has been recognized as a major contributor to environmental impact due to high consumption of natural resources, use of toxic substances, and generation of massive amounts of waste. According to the World Green Building Council (WorldGBC, 2021), the building and construction sector is responsible for 40% of global energy-related emissions. At the beginning of the millennium, the construction sector in the United States was already responsible for a substantial 30% of energy consumption and 40% of material flows (Ketikidis et al., 2013, Kibert et al., 2000). By 2030, greenhouse gas emissions from construction are estimated to rise nearly 37% compared to 2005. This increase reflects the industry's dependence on energy and resources and the large quantities of waste it produces (Fei et al., 2021). It is thus evident that the construction industry is crucial to focus on to achieve sustainable development goals. Moreover, due to its size and type of operations, the construction industry has the potential to act as a driver to realizing sustainability transition (Fei et al., 2021). As a response, the construction industry across the globe is under pressure to address their environmental impact. The pursuit of efforts towards sustainability is suggested to offer advantages such as improved competitiveness and access to untapped markets (de Paula et al., 2017), making it increasingly important for business development.

However, the construction industry is highly institutionalized and regulated, making it complex to transform (Kadefors et al., 2024). Thus, the rigidity of the construction industry is not easily challenged (Hemström et al., 2017). On the other hand, constructing any kind of building or infrastructure causes irreversible changes to the environment. These structures must be durable and safe for people to use, but also durable and safe during construction. In other words, what is built is meant to last. Therefore, it is essential not only that both the construction process and the built environment are sustainable, but also that clear regulations, rules, and procedures are in place (Fei et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it is also evident that regulations and technology development are insufficient for promoting environmental sustainability in the construction industry and that all actors (clients, architects, engineers, and contractors) need to come together in the effort to ensure that actions undertaken in all construction project phases do not harm the environment (Yusof et al., 2016). However, the difficulties of hiring skilled workforce (Goh et al., 2020), together with executive management's limited competence in sustainability issues, have been identified as a major constraint on efforts to strengthen pro-environmental development (Hagbert & Malmqvist, 2019). Similarly, Elmualim et al. (2010), who investigated facility management professionals' engagement in a sustainability agenda, found that time constraints, lack of knowledge, lack of senior management commitment, and financial constraints were the main barriers to advancing sustainability initiatives, causing inertia in change processes.

2.2 Inertia caused by the project-based nature of construction industry

Due to its project-based nature the construction industry has inertia which cause several implications for long-term change (Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema, 2016, Holti, 2011). The complexity of construction work, as well as its fragmentation and geographical dispersion, make short-term solutions and learnings preferred in respect to long-term ones (Bresnen et al., 2005; Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2012; Shen et al., 2010). A fair share of construction projects is still carried out in alignment with traditional methods and applications creating frustration among the professionals working with sustainability (Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema, 2016). Well established practices such as traditional methods act as institutions. Institutions are an interplay of rules, norms, and cultural beliefs with the activities and resources that sustain them, providing both stability and meaning, making them difficult to challenge (Kadefors et al., 2024). On top of that, a great number of different stakeholders have goals and agendas that are not necessarily complementary and aligning and can also vary across space, time, and budget constraints. Moreover, fragmented collaboration hinders flexibility in project practices (Kadefors, 1995), a difficulty stemming from the construction industry's fragmented and moderately centralized structure (Oti-Sarpong et al., 2021). When dealing with complex projects such as construction projects, four main core concepts, uncertainty, complexity, projectivity and temporality, interplay (Winch, 2023). All of which materialize in project collaborations.

Since construction projects are typically delivered by teams that form temporarily for each project, creating "temporary organizations", it has been suggested that organizational change, including sustainability-related interventions, may be more appropriately introduced at the individual project level (Lines et al., 2015). At the same time, although working in construction projects requires several single organizations to collaborate and to develop relationships and processes, implementing change at the project level can present its own set of challenges. For instance, each project brings together multiple independent organizations with established processes and routines, making it difficult to align and introduce new practices at the project level. Companies come together to perform a certain construction task but as the project is delivered, the project team is dissolved (Yusof et al., 2016). However, growth depends on firms' ability to transfer solutions from project to project (Söderlund, 2023). Therefore, it is also important to transfer knowledge and best practices in advancing sustainability across projects and organizations (Bosch-Sijtsema and Henriksson, 2014; Gluch et al. 2013b)

In a complex reality of the project-based and production-focused organizational environment, the introduction of long-term sustainable solutions remains a challenge (Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema, 2016). Oftentimes the construction industry is claimed to be unique with one-off construction projects, where none is similar to another. The study on standardizing site managers' profession revealed that practitioners in the construction sector motivate their reluctance to standardization of their roles precisely by the belief in the uniqueness of each project (Löwstedt and Sandberg, 2020). Holti (2011) in his study on institutional change in construction industry, specifically on how to move towards more collaborative ways of working, argued that new institutional arrangements arise in a process of struggle because stakeholders often attempt to retain the former routines, practices and long for former power

distribution and working dynamics. To ease these tendencies, he argued the importance of selecting participants with the technical capabilities to engage in collaborative routines and involving all key stakeholders early on, so that strategic intent aligns with operational execution. Aarseth et al. (2017) in their systematic literature review on project sustainability, identified eight strategies adopted to support sustainability goals. Three of these, namely *inclusion of sustainability-promoting actors*, *developing sustainability competencies* and *sustainability-emphasis in project portfolio management*, were found to be mutual strategies for both project organizations and host organizations, i.e. local actors tied to the project's geographical context (Aarseth et al., 2017, p. 1077). Together, these strategies demonstrate that advancing sustainability in projects depends on connecting the right people, building the right skills, and making sustainability a core part of how projects are selected and managed, both within organizations and in collaboration with local partners.

Moreover, in the construction industry, projects are always exposed to various potential changes due to, for example, their dependence on weather conditions and fragility and reactivity to supply chain and service chain instability, to name a few. The uncertainty of building projects and ad-hoc sometimes improvisational problem-solving logic, common in construction industry, may lead to reluctance or resistance to effort, time, and budget consuming change or even to conflict in multi-organizational projects (Winch, 2012). Holti (2011) argues that: *"When coordination issues arise, each player looks how best to exploit the terms of their individual contract while expecting everyone else to do the same, often at the expense of the efficiency and effectiveness of the project as a whole"* (p. 362). Moreover, different professional groups may act along different professional logics (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). The described tendencies of the project stakeholders (players) to secure their individual interests within a project in temporal situations of instability in organizational practice, that according to the institutional work theory, may arise as a result of the actions of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions that shape aspects of organizational reality (Gluch and Bosch-Sijtsema, 2016), may hamper the change initiatives. Addressing these tendencies is important because stakeholder involvement is necessary for the proactive adoption of sustainable practices in the construction industry (Moshood et al., 2024).

3. Previous studies on leadership and leaders

In this chapter various perspectives on leadership and leaders are presented. The next section focuses specifically on sustainability leadership and sustainability leaders' work.

3.1 Leadership typologies

Leadership is widely recognized as critical in organizational and academic contexts. Over forty typologies of leadership have been proposed, which demonstrates both the importance of leadership and the ongoing need to develop knowledge in this area (Alvesson et al., 2017). For instance, transactional leadership emphasizes rewards tied to effort and outcomes and thus targets followers' self-interest (Buhr et al., 2023). Transformational leadership centers on leading by example, providing intellectual stimulation, encouraging individual development, and inspiring others (Graves and Sarkis, 2018). Another example is charismatic-transformational leadership which emphasizes leaders' charm, persuasion, and appeal that are helpful in inspiring followers. Responsible leadership builds on the foundations of ethical leadership, servant leadership, and authentic leadership (Abraham, 2024). Responsible leaders bring together diverse stakeholders and encourage their involvement in pursuing goals that serve a higher social purpose within organizations and in society at large (Maak and Pless, 2006). Responsible leaders practice envisioning future and invite others to be future-looking (ibidem). Whyte et al. (2025) argued that making desirable futures necessitates socialized leadership, that can be defined as the work of setting up and maintaining organizational contexts by giving account to social capital. Socialized leadership, Whyte et al. (2025) further define is transformational and inclusive in addressing complexity.

Brandt (2016) sorted leadership disciplines into value-based and non-value-based, with value-based leadership emphasizing leaders' personal values and their connection to leaders' actions. To value-based leadership philosophies belong, for instance, servant leadership, self-sacrificial leadership, complex leadership, contextual leadership, ethical leadership, authentic leadership and relational leadership. Non-value-based leadership, as outlined by Brandt (2016), encompasses three main approaches, namely the trait-based approach, focusing on predispositions to be a leader, the skills-based approach, viewing leadership as a set of skills that can be trained and mastered, and the contingency approach which focuses on situation and adopting the behavior to each follower individually.

Although each of the leadership typologies highlights important aspects and characteristics of leadership and each is useful in different organizational arrangements and different challenges at hand, these definitions often overlap and become, as Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) call it, "*a verbal hook*". Van Knippenberg and Sitkin argue that if leadership is defined by the attributed achievement of desirable effects on followers, then studying its effectiveness is problematic, because the definition already assumes its effectiveness. They stress that *"The problem thus is the inclusion of perceptions of leadership's effects on the predictor side, while similar perceptions are included on the outcome side"* (p. 15).

Within leadership studies, there are also approaches that focus less on defining what leadership is and more on examining how it comes into being and how it is carried out in practice. For

instance, Whyte et al. (2025) argue that leadership is negotiated in organizational context. Thus, the distinction between the leader, as an individual occupying a formal position, and leadership, as a communicative process that fosters leader–follower roles, identities, and relational dynamics, is important (Tourish, 2014). For example, scholars have observed that leaders are generally considered to hold individual accountability for both positive and negative organizational outcomes (Meindl et al., 1985; Alvesson at al., 2017, Tourish 2018). Related to this accountability, Miendl et al. (1985), for example, have problematized the assumption that leaders can control an entire organization and its future, suggesting it is an overly romanticized view on leadership. This opens for an alternative view on leadership as a continuous and contextually dependent process.

3.1 Leadership as a continuous and contextual process

Tourish (2014) in his conceptual paper on complexity leadership, argues that literature offers an imbalanced view on the nature of leaders' agency. Meindl et al. (1985) and Alvesson at al. (2017) note that leadership is often portrayed as heroic, which is not only amiss but oftentimes dysfunctional. Tourish (2018) provides a different view on leadership, which is referred to as complex leadership. He criticized scholars for continuing to "*offer a theory of complex organizations led by non-complex leaders who establish themselves by relatively non-complex means*" (p. 2019). The merit of leadership is inherently connected to particular social, organizational and temporal contexts, and cannot be performed regardless of the context as it is not universally fitting each of the organizational structures (Tourish, 2014). The identities of leaders as well as the identities of followers are therefore simultaneously constructed and reconstructed through various interactions, including conflict, resolution and breakdowns. Thus, neither leadership nor followership is definitively established (Tourish, 2018).

Alvesson et al. (2017) question the widespread tendency in contemporary literature to portray leadership as inherently strong and heroic. They also describe "*post-heroic*" perspectives on leadership, in which leaders are still regarded as heroes but are characterized as humble and hardworking. Both approaches are criticized for inaccuracy and unnaturalistic and simplistic demonstration of what leadership should be. Alvesson et al. (2017) propose a different approach to leadership, which they call reflexive leadership. In contrast, reflexive leadership is intrinsically embedded in the context, thus reflexive leaders are involved in organizational community, aware of potential cultural conflicts and can create alignment and realignment but also smoothen potential tensions.

Alvesson et al. (2017) view on reflexive leadership draws from a wide array of leadership theories and types, showing that leadership is not about following a single formula. It is shaped by context, relationships, and a willingness to question and adapt. By drawing from value-based, transformational, and post-heroic approaches, Alvesson highlights that leadership involves both ethical awareness and practical engagement with others. This perspective moves away from the idea of leaders as heroic individuals and instead sees leadership as a process that is shared, flexible, and grounded in real organizational life.

Reflexive leadership as exemplified by Alvesson et al. (2017), entails charisma, sense of fairness, strong sense of ethics, dedication to lead by example and motivating others to think

and do more than minimum. Reflexive leadership shows consistency, originality, integrity and sacrifice. Reflexive leaders are eager to give account to others and credit their role in achieving outcomes. As such, leaders work in a reflexive way by transcending their role, working horizontally as well as vertically, exercising authority while showing respect to hierarchy. Reflective leaders undertake actions such as creating an enclave (for instance, an enclave of resistance that opposes decisions made by executives but still acts according to the rules) or a guiding coalition. They use clear and firm communication and signals, clarify meanings, manifest readiness to use power, demonstrate that their actions are done for a greater good, and act as a spokesperson. Leaders work in a reflexive way by transcending their role, working horizontally as well as vertically, exercising authority while showing respect to hierarchy. Considering a wider picture while focusing on the core issues is also part of working reflexively as well as offering framework for handling situation or issue at hand in an intellectual why while also acknowledging and supporting emotional states of the followers. Alvesson et al. (2017) stresses that leadership occurs when individuals willingly accept guidance in interpreting and defining what must be achieved. Thus, reflexive leadership work concerns developing and celebrating reflexive followers, that is individuals who become followers after careful thought and consideration. Alvesson et al., argue that reflexive leadership can be considered in terms of the prophet, preacher, psychotherapist, party host, and pedagogue, which collectively are called the "5Ps of doing leadership".

3.2 Previous research on leadership for sustainability

Sustainability leadership is a key driver in managing organizational change toward sustainability (Eustachio et al., 2023). Sajjad et al., (2024) highlight that sustainability concerns (social, environmental and economic) are divergent but interconnected which result in paradoxical tensions. Sustainability leadership further entails balancing between short-term and long-term goals. Accordingly, it is crucial that sustainability leaders have the ability to anticipate the effects of each of their actions because their actions can have consequences on ecosystem, social welfare, economic stability, or all of these at once (Sajjad et al., 2024). Leadership for sustainability focuses on social and environmental responsibility, which generates long-term wellbeing and lasting value for all stakeholders, those in present but also those in the future. Thus, managing sustainability requires leadership that can simultaneously address competing demands, but that gives priority to sustainability demands (ibidem). Ludvig et al. (2013) stress the importance of sense-giving when introducing organizational change related to increased sustainability in buildings. Sense-giving is the process of attempting to influence others sense-making, so that they see specific information as relevant to interpret and act on. The study showed that strategic sense-giving in organizations is possible for individuals who use discursive competences and are granted issue-related legitimacy (ibidem).

Sustainability management is often considered a control and compliance function (Lozano et al., 2015). However, sustainability work also entails implementation and management of change processes, i.e. moving from unsustainable organizational practices to sustainable ones. Managing change processes for sustainability requires recognizing human aspects that may come to the surface when organizational status quo is being challenged. This means that sustainability leadership is performed through change processes such as mitigating resistance

to change and engaging others (Lozano et al., 2015). Thus, to lead sustainability issues forward, sustainability managers need to enact creative work, which is not commonly recognized as a part of their role (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). This exemplifies contrasts with the preconceived notion of the sustainability manager role as one focused on assessment (Gluch and Räisänen, 2012) and control (Lozano et al., 2015).

Robertson and Carleton (2018) studied environmentally specific transformational leadership and found that leadership for environmental yields the best results when employees had already felt a personal responsibility for the environmental sustainability. In other words, leadership outcomes rest upon employees' internal environmental locus of control (ibidem). Thus, building upon existing work, leadership for sustainability is concerned with cultivating others' internal locus of control that fosters sustainability friendly behaviors, rather than sustainability managers acting as a control function. Therefore, for companies to engage with sustainability in a meaningful way both committed leadership and employee's engagement is necessary (Eccles and Perkins, 2012). The ability to influence others behavior and transform it towards more sustainability-oriented is thus critical aspect of leadership for sustainability (Boeske, 2023). Furthermore, organizations should take responsibility developing sustainability-oriented employees (Robertson and Carleton, 2018). In fact, educating and mentoring other employees as well as providing training are responsibilities already commonly assigned to sustainability leaders (Gluch et al., 2013a, Opoku et al., 2015).

Sustainability leaders, as discussed in this chapter, need to navigate interconnected social, environmental, and economic challenges that often involve paradoxical tensions. It requires leaders to anticipate the broader consequences of their actions, balance short- and long-term objectives, and prioritize lasting value for both present and future stakeholders. Rather than acting solely as compliance officers, sustainability managers are increasingly called to guide organizational change, address resistance, and foster a sense of shared responsibility for sustainability across the organization. This perspective sets the stage for the following analysis, which examines how sustainability managers enact sustainability leadership, how their leadership shapes and is shaped by organizational structures, as well as how they expect their leadership role to unfold in the future.

4. Theoretical lenses

This chapter presents theoretical lenses used to design the study and analyze the empirical data and results of the research.

4.1 Structuration theory

This research is guided by the structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). As highlighted by Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2005), theories researchers choose should be viewed as alternatives rather than competitors. Similarly, the application of structuration theory is more of an alternative rather than competing approach to studying leadership for sustainability. Furthermore, the theoretical choice is motivated with aspiration to shed light on leadership for sustainability from a distinct perspective.

According to British sociologist Anthony Giddens, agency and structure are mutuality co-creating entities. The duality of agency and structure is at the core of structuration theory. Agency mainly describes actors' ability to act (rather than just intending to do something). Whereas structure is manifested through enacted rules, meanings, habits and routines (den Hond et al., 2012; Shove et al., 2012). Structure, Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2005) stress, gives form and shape to social life, but it is not form nor shape itself (p. 1356). Actors (agents) can initiate structural changes, whether they do it intentionally and unintentionally, while structure both enables and constrains them in doing so. Thus, structuration theory bridges micro and macro perspectives and views the two as mutually constitutive. Macro-level structural analysis and micro-level analysis of agency are analyzed to understand creation and reproduction of social structures (i.e., institutions, norms, values).

In Giddens' view, understanding and researching society is not possible as long as the agency of its co-creators – individuals operating individually and collectively, who have the initiative and the ability to reflect, and who operate based on their knowledge – is not considered. The theory acknowledges reflexivity, i.e., individuals' capacity to reflect on their actions, the consequences of these actions, and implications of these actions, which is an interesting perspective in case of sustainability work. It is practice that was granted at heart of the structuration theory and given the mandate of mediating the experience of individual actor and societal totality (Giddens, 1984).

4.2 Structuration theory in managerial context

Using structuration theory as a theoretical lens helps capture leadership as an ongoing, dynamic process, enabling analysis of how sustainability managers continuously enact and negotiate their roles as leaders within organizational contexts. Structuration theory recognizes that sustainability managers as leaders both shape and are shaped by the organizational structures in which they operate. This duality means that every action taken by a manager is not only influenced by existing routines and norms but also can potentially alter those structures. This perspective is essential for studying how sustainability managers enact leadership and drive sustainability within organizations.

Structuration theory has been applied in several organizational studies. For example, Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2005) focused on illustrating the usage of structuration theory in empirical research on the IT and organization studies example to show how structuration theory can be used from both conceptual and from methodological perspectives. Steiner et al. (2022) applied structuration theory to investigate social entrepreneurs, which allowed them to theorize the interdependence of structure and agents across time and space and to understand links and the mutual interaction of impacts of social entrepreneurs and their structure. They concluded that the evolution of social entrepreneurs is shaped by the dynamic interplay between structural forces and the agency of social entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurs intentionally attempt to address social challenges, but their actions can bring unintended outcomes. Bresnen et al. (2005) worked with structuration theory to study change implementations in organizations in construction industry. They found that the successful implementation of new managerial initiatives depends on the dynamic between structural conditions and managerial agency. Their research demonstrated that project managers rely more on their established practices as sources of meaning and legitimacy than on the broader organizational initiatives the companies seek to implement. Another example of a study that that structuration theory is research on Certified B Corporations' (B Corps) impact on sustainable development (Tabares et al., 2021). Organizations certified as B Corps pursue social and environmental value while generating economic value. Structuration theory was used to systematically assess B Corps' involvement in sustainable development. The article concludes that B Corps influence social structures by signification (influencing through direct and communicative interactions, based on shared meanings), domination (use of authoritative resources which allows to exert power), and, legitimation (connecting to norms and moral standards).

Organizations constitute an arena to creation and reproduction of practice through continuous interaction. These practices bring people together into social systems, examples of which are national society, industry, organization and project teams (Whittington, 2015). Whittington (2015), who used structuration theory in his study, stressed that middle managers are increasingly included in the strategy process and used this development to illustrate how structuration theory can be applied to understand changes in organizational roles and participation. Such change is not consolidated as an outcome of a single event. Instead, the increasing involvement of middle managers in organizational strategy can be understood as the result of many individuals continuously developing their skills and taking on new responsibilities. Whittington stated: *"Every engagement by middle managers in the strategy process of their organizations is at once an expression of this structural change and, insofar as they are effective, an extension of it"* (p. 151). From structuration theory perspective this means that when middle managers participate in strategy processes the existing organizational structure is on the one hand reflected, and on the other hand challenged.

Although structuration theory has been applied to studying phenomena in a managerial context, its potential to studying leadership has not been exploited. Nonetheless, studying leadership for sustainability though structuration theory lenses is promising because as highlighted by Liao (2022) leaders' capability in promoting sustainable business transformation depends on the synergy between leadership awareness and situation in time and space.

4.3 Future-making studies

The definition of sustainability leaders by Eustachio et al. (2023), as stated in the introduction, emphasizes that such leaders have a strong orientation on motivating and engaging others, on problem-solving and on future-thinking. Hence, sustainability leaders are expected not only to solve problems and motivate others, but also to envision and shape the future of their organizations. It is thus important to understand not only how sustainability leaders respond to current challenges but also how they imagine development of their roles and work in the future.

When sustainability is evaluated at the systemic level, for example in the context of an entire industry, it should include analysis of underlying structures, projection into the future, and assessment of both sustainable and unsustainable trends (Kemp and Martens, 2007). Bos-de Vos et al. (2025) suggest that development of comprehensive approaches for integrating sustainability into organizational practices necessitates adoption of theoretical lenses that supports theorizing of projecting and anticipation of future developments. Similarly, Gümüsay and Reinecke (2024) encourage development of theories that future-oriented, imagination-focused and values-based. Projecting refers to a dialogic process in which a desired future is expressed and shared with others through narrative, making mutual engagement and interpretation possible (ibidem). Moreover, projected futures are continuously interpreted and re-interpreted through interaction and shared sensemaking (Bos-de Vos et al., 2025). Kemp and Martens (2007) argue that articulating projections, visions or anticipations can help clarify the scope of major change, offering a useful basis for reflection, evaluation, and ultimately for guiding action.

Projection is an important component of future making. Whyte et al. (2022) define future making as "the work of making sense of possible and probable futures, and evaluating, negotiating and giving form to preferred ones" (p. 2). Comi et al. (2025) in their conceptual paper advocate that future making should be approached as emancipatory inquiry. Emancipatory inquiry can be described as collective and value-based judgments of what the future might and should be (Comi et al. 2025). Thus, when individuals engage in future making, they use imagination, dialogue, and negotiation to articulate and construct alternative visions of the future, with the intention of influencing how the present unfolds (Comi et al., 2025). Future making is thus a practice that seeks translating desirable futures into reality (Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2022). In recent conceptualizations of future making, 'imagining desirable futures' is advocated highlighting their potential in addressing sustainability issues and attaining sustainability goals (Comi et al., 2025; Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2022; Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2024). Solving sustainability challenges is an example of a desirable future. Thus, desirable futures are the futures that normatively are worth wanting.

4.4 Combining structuration theory with a future making approach

While structuration theory provides a lens for understanding how agency and structure interact to shape organizational practices, it is often oriented toward analyzing how current routines and organizational environments are mutually created and reproduced. The future making approach adds a forward-looking dimension by emphasizing the active role of sustainability leaders and other organizational actors play in imagining, negotiating, and striving for desirable

futures. Future making highlights the importance of projecting and articulating visions, engaging in dialogue, and collectively constructing narratives about what the future could and should be. This forward-looking perspective complements structuration theory by not only considering how existing structures constrain or enable action, but also how actors may intentionally work to reshape those structures in pursuit of shared, value-driven goals. Combining structuration theory with future making allows for a richer understanding of how leaders and organizations can move beyond maintaining the status quo and foster the pursuit of futures where sustainability gets its momentum.

5. Research methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework. It details the data collection and data analytical techniques used.

5.1 Research approach

In existing studies, leadership for sustainability has been studied theoretically and empirically, both qualitatively and quantitatively. This research is nested in a qualitative approach as qualitative methods enable insight into the lived experiences and grasp meaning individuals place on events, places, structures (Miles et al., 2014) and finally what meaning they give account to their own doing, practice and agency. The main method for data collection was conducting semi-structured interviews as it is the most appropriate method to learn about the interviewees' point of view (Bell et al., 2019). This approach grants flexibility so that interviewees can share aspects they find important, and which could not be anticipated in the interview guide. The literature study was ongoing both before, during and after data collection and is continued.

An inductive approach was applied as appropriate and practically valuable approach to qualitative analysis (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). This involves identifying patterns, themes, and categories that emerge from the data itself, rather than applying predefined structures before collecting and analyzing the data (Patton, 1980). Moreover, this approach is motivated by the aspiration to grant preeminence to empirical data.

5.2 Reflection on ontology and epistemology

This research adopts a phenomenological approach. The difference between phenomenon-driven research (PDR) from theory-driven research (TDR) is substantial. Motivation for research in the case of PDR is oriented on making contributions to capturing and extending knowledge of the managerial or organizational phenomena, such as leadership. PDR's primary target audience is not solely academics like in the case of TDR, but also practitioners (Schwarz and Stensaker, 2014). The aspiration of the study is to generate findings that support sustainability managers as leaders in sustainability work. PDR prioritizes relevance, usefulness, and applicability of the research results along with practical indications derived from them.

This research adopts social constructivism ontology. In this view human beings are social in their nature. This stance advocates recognizing that reality is not objective or fixed but is instead socially constructed through social interactions, shared meanings, and contextual understandings (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). It assumes that sustainability work, as enacted, experienced and described by sustainability managers, is shaped by the social and institutional environments in which they operate.

Social constructivism as ontology carries implication for epistemological stance of this research. Epistemologically, the study is grounded in interpretivism, which emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences, interpretations, and perspectives of participants. Knowledge is generated through engagement with their narratives, acknowledging that

multiple realities exist and that the researcher plays an active role in interpreting these meanings. This stance aligns with the qualitative, interview-based methodology that was used in this research to explore how sustainability leadership is understood and enacted in practice. Knowledge is thus socially constructed and I, as a researcher in my role, interpret the evidence collected throughout the research process.

5.3 Research process

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews with sustainability managers.

Literature studies

An exploratory literature study was being performed as preparation for data collection. It informed the generation of interview questions and the final interview guide. It was ongoing during the data collection. Of interest were publications that discussed the construction industry from a sustainability perspective, specifically challenges and hindrances for sustainability, as well as studies on sustainability work and practice sustainability profession and other organizational actors. Furthermore, the initial literature study was focused on sustainability matters in project-based organizations. In this phase of my research the motivation was to explore and integrate various approaches, lenses and angles to research sustainability, understand the framework and identify discussions that I aspire to join through my research.

Simultaneously to data analysis, the literature study became more focused on aspects discussed further in the included papers. The literature on sustainability leadership, and business models for sustainability framework were studied. In this endeavor I reflected on the implications of application of theoretical lenses the structuration theory offers.

Study 1: Interview study 1

The data collection aimed at investigating the development of the sustainability managers' role. The development process was examined from both a retrospective perspective, focusing on how the professional role has evolved in relation to developments in sustainability, and future looking perspective by capturing expectations for its development in the future. The focus was also on investigating environmental sustainability managers' daily work and practices. Given that the aspiration of the study was to investigate personal carrier journeys, a semi-structured interview was employed as a main data collection method. This method supports asking open-ended questions as well as asking follow-up questions to further investigate discussed matters (Kvale, 2007).

Purposive sampling allows for selection of interviewees based on their special characteristics (Taherdoost, 2016). The interviewees were selected based on their experience in working with environmental sustainability in architecture, engineering and construction (AEC) industry in Sweden. The interviews were conducted between March 2019 and February 2020. Therefore, the data was collected by the research group prior to when I began my doctoral studies and was made available for me for further analysis.

In total, thirty-one interviews were conducted, out of which fourteen were deemed suitable for my study. Although all the individuals interviewed worked as sustainability or environmental professionals, most of them (17) did not hold managerial responsibility for sustainability in their respective organizations. Thus, managerial responsibility for sustainability was the inclusion criterium for interviews in my study. Fourteen interviewees met this criterium. Information about the interviewees who participated in interview study 1 is compiled in Table 1.

Table 1: List of interviewees in interview study 2

No.	Type of organization	Professional role/Title	Length	Code
1	Construction	Quality, environment and work environment manager	1h30min	X05
2	Architecture	Environmental manager	1h	X06
3	Construction	Sustainability manager	1h01min	X08
4	Real estate	Sustainability manager	46min	X09
5	Construction	Sustainability manager	57min	X15
6	Construction	Sustainability manager	52min	X16
7	Construction	Sustainability manager	1h07min	X17
8	Real estate	Environmental manager	55min	X19
9	Architecture	Sustainability manager	48min	X20
10	Construction	Sustainability manager	42min	X21
11	Construction	Quality, environment and work environment manager	52min	X22
12	Real estate	Sustainability manager	1h	X28
13	Construction	Quality, environment and work environment manager	1h10min	X30
14	Real estate	Sustainability manager	1h	X31

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish. For the purpose of this study the fourteen interviews were translated into English. Thereafter the interviews were coded using NVivo software for qualitative analysis. As is common in exploratory research, the themes discussed in this thesis emerged from the data. The analysis resulted in the identification of three dominant strategies aiming at raising engagement in sustainability work that are presented and discussed in Paper I.

Study 2: Interview study 2

Similarly to interview study 1, in interviews study 2 semi-structured interviews were employed as the data collection method. The interview guide consisted of three thematic sets of questions 1) sustainability leadership, 2) business models for sustainability, and 3) anticipated futures for sustainability leadership role. The first theme in the interview guide was leadership for sustainability and corresponding leaders' managerial practices. The intention was to discuss daily activities and practices sustainability managers as sustainability leaders employ to advance sustainability in their organization. In the second theme was focused on current business models and whether sustainability is sufficiently reflected in those models, as well as

questions about the design of business models for sustainability and how a perfect business model would look like. Finally, interviewees were asked about trends and challenges they perceive are influencing their roles and daily work and about future developments of their role as sustainability leaders. Overall, the interview guide was composed of 17 questions, excluding demographic and warm-up questions.

Purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) was used to select participants whose professional roles involved managerial responsibility for sustainability within their organizations. The interviewees were approached via email and asked to participate in the study. Except for the invitation, a short description of the research was provided. Interview study 2 was conducted from August to November 2024. While two of the interviews were in person, most of the interviews (23) were held online. On average interviews lasted one hour and fifteen minutes.

The twenty-five interviewees in this study represent twenty different Swedish firms within construction (N=10), architecture (N=2), consultancy (N=7) and real estate (N=6) from both private and public sectors. All the interviewees held managerial responsibility for sustainability in their respective organizations. Eight of the individuals interviewed had executive positions. Information about the interviewees who participated in interview study 2 is compiled in Table 2.

Following the interview round, the data was transcribed verbatim. Then, the data was submitted to analysis in NVivo software for qualitative analysis The analytical process was iterative, grounded in empirical data, and reflexive. This reflexive approach, emphasized by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009), is essential in qualitative research because it helps generate deeper insights and understanding. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For Paper II the interviews were coded to explore how sustainability leaders anticipate their future roles and work. For Paper III, the interviews were coded according to the interview questions, which focused on perspectives regarding business models for sustainability and on exploring what an ideal business model for sustainability might look like.

Table 2: List of interviewees in Study 2

No.	Type of organization	Professional role/Title	Length
1	Construction	Head of sustainability	55min
2	Construction	Environmental coordinator	1h22min
3	Consultancy	Program manager	1h41min
4	Real estate	Group sustainability manager	51min
5	Consultancy	CEO, Sustainability coordinator in projects	1h16min
6	Architecture	CEO	1h22min
7	Construction	Environmental development manager	1h
8	Consultancy	Vice-president	1h45min
9	Construction	Environmental manager	1h17min
10	Real estate	Chef sustainability Officer	1h29min
11	Construction	Quality and environmental manager	1h08min
12	Construction	Head of group environment	1h34min
13	Consultancy	Founder and partner	1h38min
14	Construction	Sustainability specialist	1h5min
15	Construction	Sustainability manager	1h18min
16	Consultancy	Sustainability and Quality Manager / Sustainability Strategist	1h20min
17	Real estate	Sustainability specialist	1h16min
18	Construction	Sustainability business partner	1h19min
19	Real estate	Director innovation and sustainability	1h22min
20	Real state	Sustainability director	1h12min
21	Construction	Operations Developer Environmental Sustainability	1h18min
22	Architecture	Sustainability advisor	1h02min
23	Real estate	Head of sustainability	1h29min
24	Consultancy	Head of sustainability	1h10min
25	Consultancy	Head of Sustainability/Fire Safety Researcher	1h09min

5.4 Research quality

This study has certain limitations that need to be discussed in relation to research quality. This study primarily relies on interviews for data collection, which is often criticized for providing subjective accounts on studied phenomenon (Bell et al., 2019). Although a quantitative method could offer a broad overview of sustainability leadership practices, it would not capture the nuanced dynamics between sustainability managers' agency and organizational structures. Thus, qualitative approach was chosen to gain deeper insight into the experiences and perspectives of sustainability managers. Exploring daily work practices, organizational tensions, and competing priorities requires the flexibility and depth that qualitative research provides Another consideration is that the reflections provided by sustainability managers in this study may be influenced by their personal perspectives and values. However, as Brandt

(2016) highlights, sustainability leadership is inherently value-based. Therefore, this study acknowledges that sustainability managers' motivations and values play a significant role in shaping their approach to leadership and how they enact it.

Reflection on trustworthiness of my research is informed by criteria for evaluating qualitative research developed by Bell et al. (2019) in their textbook on Business Research Methods. Trustworthiness can be assessed through the following criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I comment upon each of them below, relating my research to these criteria.

For enhanced *Credibility* a researcher must make sure that the research is carried out in the canons of good practice and consulting research findings with relevant to the research focus individuals (Bell et al., 2019). Credibility was therefore ensured by adhering to a rigorous research process. Aiming at retaining research credibility, two reference group meetings were carried out on March 13th, 2024, and May 19th, 2025. The reference group consists of individuals in various roles (for example Sustainability and Quality Manager, Director Research and Development, Director of Sustainability, Innovation and Sustainability Specialist, Senior Business Advisor, representatives from academia), representing various organizations (construction, real estate, construction association, consultant company). The aim of these sessions was to allow potential adjustments to research design and process (1st reference group meeting) and to validate the results (2nd reference group meeting).

To satisfy the criterium of *transferability*, which is often challenging in qualitative research, the tick description of the context of the phenomena studied was included in this document as well as in each of the included papers. Thick description, as Bell et al. (2019) stress entails provision of rich accounts of the details of the studied context. Furthermore, multiple quotes were provided in the papers both as an expression of empirical nature of the papers and demonstration of the thought process and reasoning in the analysis of the data for readers to assess transferability of the results to other potential contexts. These were also peer-reviewed by other scholars. However, conducted in the Swedish construction industry, the empirical studies offer insights that may extend to other project-based industries in Scandinavian countries, though their applicability across wider cultural contexts and other types of industries is limited.

Dependability entails storage in an accessible manner of complete records throughout all the stages of the research process. It thus was ensured by carful documentation of the data as advocated by Bell et al. (2019). The interview data is stored in a secured folder, codified, and readily accessible to all the researchers involved in the project. These researchers act as auditors who can assess that the procedures were followed properly. The interview data were coded in NVivo software for qualitative analysis. Documentation includes both the coding structure and key concepts and terms applied during the process.

Finally, *confirmability* is the criterion that is concerned with researcher's objectivity, is achieved by acknowledging potential biases. While the choice of interviewees, as I argue, is firm, deliberate and crafted so that the insights from sustainability managers, the interviewees to this study, enable investigation of the research problem at hand, I could be biased in my

interpretations of the data myself. However, additional effort was put into minimizing potential biases. These efforts included consulting my interpretations with other scholars and practitioners and continuous literature study to challenge assumptions made. Even though absolute objectivity cannot be fulfilled, which I discuss in greater detail in the subchapter devoted to the limitations of the study, I strived to remain neutral and let the empirical data prevail.

5.5 Ethical aspects

Several measures were implemented to adhere to the four ethical principles advocated by Bell et al. (2019). These four principles are avoidance of harm, informed consent, confidentiality and deception prevention. Harm entails a few facets that go beyond physical harm. Stress and negative influence on self-esteem are examples of harm that can be provoked. Thus, effort was put into creating a safe, confidential, and friendly yet professional atmosphere during the interviews. Participation in the study was voluntary. Interviewees were well-informed about the research purpose, the scope of the questions as well as expected outcomes of the data collection, that is academic publications and doctoral thesis. This approach helped prevent any deception regarding this research. The consent was informed and granted by the interviewees. Confidentiality was preserved by removing information that allows identification of the individuals who participated in the study. The names of organizations were also changed. Information such as the size (small, medium, large) and type of organization (architecture, construction, consultancy and real estate/client) were kept and used for analytical purposes.

6. Summary of appended papers

In this chapter the three included papers are summarized.

6.1 Paper I: Creating a Momentum for Environmental Sustainability: Strategies Employed by Sustainability Managers

Paper I investigates one of the most important concerns for leadership for sustainability–raising engagement in sustainability work. It does so by exploring the strategies employed by sustainability managers to promote and advance sustainability, both in strategy and operations, in built environment organizations. In this study the theoretical lens of structuration theory was adopted. The underlying assumption of structuration theory is duality of agency and structure and viewing them as mutually constitutive. Findings, which build on 14 interviews with sustainability managers, reveal three dominant strategies employed by sustainability managers to raise engagement in sustainability work.

The first strategy is targeting individuals with executive power. Sustainability managers highlight the need for engaging organizational actors who hold sufficient power and can thus influence the direction for business development. However, this strategy has its challenges. Securing attention and commitment to sustainability from executive management is often difficult, as they must make priorities among multiple issues, oftentimes competing, and still possess a modest understanding of sustainability.

The second strategy involves bringing on board as many people as possible. This strategy is about anchoring sustainability at the core of organizational strategy and operations. The aspiration is to inspire everybody to work with sustainability issues, including people who do not have sustainability formally stated in their role responsibilities. This strategy also carries challenges. Specifically, sustainability managers need to be attentive and sense the right moment to address the masses. Their agency in influencing actions of other organizational actors is thus bound to, enabled and constrained by organizational structure for instance the periodic workflows which are expressions of organizational structure.

Finally, finding ambassadors was found to be enacted by sustainability managers as a strategy to promote sustainability work. Ambassadors are valuable assets to sustainability managers. Their commitment to sustainability issues often comes across as more convincing and more transmittable than efforts by sustainability managers. Ambassadors act as allies to sustainability managers by offering an additional layer of follow-up on sustainability progress, while also receiving feedback and insights that other organizational actors may be more comfortable sharing with them than directly with sustainability professionals.

These three strategies show that to materialize organizations sustainability ambitions; many organizational actors are needed to come together. Sustainability managers' agency is expressed by being able to influence others and by that challenge the current structure in an organization. Thus, the empowerment in performing sustainability work is inherently bound to the engaged others.

By combining structuration theory and research on sustainability work and transition, this study provides a deeper understanding on sustainability leadership. It also evidences the interrelationship between sustainability managers and various agentic actors who belong to organizational structure. The applied theoretical lens revealed that sustainability managers' work involves balancing the implementation of overarching business strategy and organizational sustainability goals, with the organic work required to promote sustainability integration both horizontally and vertically within an organization. Leading sustainability work is thus complex. Although sustainability managers hold organizational responsibility for leading sustainability work, they also need to strive to gain the mandate to enact their leadership. As a theoretical contribution this study provides an empirical example of duality between agency and structure as well as how they are mutually enabling and constraining.

Paper I also contributes to research on and practice of sustainability leadership by exploring strategies that sustainability managers employ to engage others. It shows that individuals in sustainability management roles need to attract both executive management and masses within an organization. It also shows that they cannot bring about sustainability transition by themselves. They need to engage many into sustainability work, for which they often need to rely on ambassadors to support their efforts toward raising engagement. The findings demonstrate that sustainability managers act as leaders but oftentimes do not hold sufficient mandate to make executive decisions that promote and advance sustainability beyond compliance.

6.2 Paper II: Projecting sustainability management: Anticipated futures of specialization and democratization

Paper II investigates how sustainability managers expect their role to evolve in the future. The analysis of 25 interviews with sustainability managers representing architecture, consulting, construction and client organizations in Sweden, revealed two anticipated futures to sustainability work.

Sustainability managers have been traditionally viewed as an expertise support function; however, they also have been charged with centralized responsibility for corporate sustainability compliance work. Introduction of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and EU-Taxonomy were indicated by almost all sustainability managers as expected catalyst for changes in their work and practice. These regulations require specific skills and competencies in reporting, similar to financial reporting. Simultaneously, while climate mitigation has long dominated sustainability discussions, issues such as biodiversity, water treatment and management, carbon capture and storage, and negative emissions, to name a few, are also coming to foreground of sustainability concerns. Addressing those issues necessitates highly specialized knowledge. Moreover, fluency in finance and economic as well as good understanding of business models and development are yet other competences that are expected of sustainability managers. Interviewed sustainability managers signal that it all becomes too much for one person to handle effectively. Thus, Paper II explores how anticipated futures may shape and change sustainability management practice. It does so by examining potential pathways for sustainability managers' role.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed two anticipated futures: *specialization* and *democratization* of sustainability work. *Specialization* entails the emergence of new expert roles or development of existing ones into more specialized ones. These are to be supervised by sustainability managers, who will act as general sustainability leaders, qualified generalists rather than specialists. The other anticipated future entails *democratization*. This entails horizontal and vertical dissemination of sustainability work across the entire organization. The democratization of sustainability responsibilities marks a transition from centralized expertise to shared accountability and integration into the daily work of individuals outside of the sustainability team. Sustainability managers' role is thus to streamline the sustainability know-how and practice so that it becomes the core to organizational operations. While the two anticipated futures are informed by interviewees' experience and knowledge, they also carry elements of the desired futures.

The paper provides both theoretical and practical contributions. The future-making stream of research has not claimed a distinction between desired and desirable futures. Paper II provides evidence that these are indeed different. This study contributes to the theory by making this distinction. Desirable futures are those considered worth pursuing because they are grounded in shared values and normative principles. In contrast, desired futures reflect individual preferences and are not necessarily grounded in normative values. They instead describe preferred turn of events and are projected on levels such as profession or organization, rather than on a global level. Thus, while both anticipated futures (specialization and democratization) carry components of desired futures, these futures may not be normatively desirable. Thus, this paper contributes to the theory of future making by offering an agentic perspective on desired futures that is not bound by normativity assumptions about what is considered desirable.

Paper II offers practical contributions in illustrating how sustainability managers anticipate the development of their work which provides actionable guidance for organizations to reframe job descriptions, distribute responsibilities for sustainability more effectively, and prepare for the future pressures (for instance by creating and developing specialized roles). Moreover, the paper also shows that sustainability managers can use legislation (such as CSRD) as proxy for authorization to strengthen their mandate and exert influence on the executive board and strategic decision-making processes.

6.3 Paper III: Pursuing Value for and Beyond Profit: Sustainability Managers' Perspective on Business Models for Sustainability

Paper III explores framings of business model for sustainability within the Swedish construction industry. The shift from business models to business models for sustainability is considered imperative for sustainability transition. Although business models for sustainability receive a great deal of scholarly attention, the role of sustainability managers in generating those remains understudied. The study builds on 25 interviews with individuals who hold managerial responsibility for sustainability in their organization. Structuration theory served as the ontological foundation for both the design of the interview guide and the subsequent analysis of the data. This perspective informed the development of questions that addressed the relationship between organizational structures, such as business models and resource

constraints, and interpretive capacity of sustainability managers to reflect on business models for sustainability.

Analysis of the data revealed three dominant perspectives on business models for sustainability: *idealistic*, *pragmatic* and *ambiguous* perspective. The *idealistic perspective* underscored the need for societal changes. This visionary approach advocates for unprecedented prioritization of sustainability over profit. Sustainability managers who express this view encourage fundamental rethinking of existing business models, for instance from 'selling a lamp to selling a lifetime of light in the room'. The *pragmatic perspective* focuses on actionable improvements that advance sustainability in project-based organizations. The pragmatic perspective draws on the current operational practices, which restrict more profound reflection on business models for sustainability. Moreover, although this perspective offers a more utilitarian account. Finally, the *ambiguous perspective* encapsulates perceptions among the sustainability mangers that indicate limitations of business models proficiency. Some sustainability managers admitted that they do not feel confident reflecting on business models, and that they have not yet had the opportunity to engage with business model thinking in practice. In summary, functional business model for sustainability was not identified. The findings indicate that the business model for sustainability thinking is still immature among sustainability managers.

This study provides empirical examples of duality of agency and structure by showing how sustainability managers' perspectives on business model design are shaped by both individual agency and organizational structures, including prevailing norms and industry practices. Thus, structuration theory enabled exploring how organizational priorities, such as the emphasis on profit over sustainability, can influence and sometimes constrain sustainability managers' perspectives on business model design. This paper also demonstrates how these structural constraints restrict sustainability managers' ability to participate in the development of business models for sustainability. Paper III contributes also to business models for sustainability framework by identifying and problematizing the spectrum of managerial perspectives.

As a practical contribution, the findings provide evidence that sustainability values are not integrated into the core of business model design. Moreover, there is a tension between organizational expectations sustainability managers face and their competence in designing business models for sustainability. Although sustainability managers were not, thus far, included and involved in business models design, the demand for their competence in understanding and designing business models for sustainability is growing. Results show that sustainability managers' knowledge in this regard is immature, however this seems to be an outcome of their role being traditionally framed as a support function. Thus, organizational initiatives that foster relevant competencies and facilitate their application in business model design can empower sustainability managers.

7. Discussion

Based on the studies presented in this thesis and the three included papers (I–III), this chapter discusses the findings in relation to the overall aim: to critically examine leadership for sustainability by focusing on the practices, strategies, and perspectives of sustainability managers. The following discussion is structured around the two research questions, specifically addressing how sustainability leaders develop work strategies to align business objectives with sustainability goals, and how they anticipate the future trajectory of their leadership in response to increasing demands and widening scope of sustainability.

Although the construction industry brings benefits to society, it is also responsible for negative impacts and therefore has exceptional potential to contribute to sustainable development (Opoku, 2015), making construction industry critical for the achievement of sustainability goals (Shen et al., 2010). However, for sustainability to reach its momentum, empowered sustainability leadership is needed.

Organizational leadership is commonly associated with those individuals who occupy executive positions in organizations. Sustainability managers oftentimes do not hold executive positions and power. However, although other organizational leaders such as CEOs recognize that companies should set the standard in achieving sustainability objectives, they are also found to fail to grant sustainability sufficient weight in organizational business models and operational practices (Nawaz and Koç, 2018). Therefore, as organizations must engage in meaningful and robust sustainability efforts to maintain their license to operate (Robinson et al., 2011), sustainability managers are front-line professionals driving sustainable business development.

7.1 Sustainability leaders' strategies for aligning business and sustainability goals

Paper I demonstrated that raising engagement in sustainability issues is (still) an important element of sustainability leaders' daily work. It also showed that engaging others does not happen effortlessly. While sustainability leaders navigate paradoxical tensions and simultaneously address often conflicting priorities across social, economic, and environmental domains (Sajjad et al., 2024), they also need to adopt strategies to involve others in sustainability work and thereby integrate sustainability into the core of business development. One such strategy is engaging executives and decision-makers. By "wooing" those with executive power, sustainability leaders aim to embed sustainability into the core of strategic decision-making. This is crucial because executives can set the tone and direction for sustainability initiatives across the organization, and therefore their lack of engagement can become a hindrance to sustainability transition (Hagbert & Malmqvist, 2019). Another strategy sustainability leaders employ strives to involve the broader workforce. They recognize that meaningful sustainability transition requires widespread engagement (cf. Yusof, 2016). The third strategy aimed at increasing engagement and installing sustainability at the heart of the organizations' operations is to find individuals who can act as ambassadors for sustainability issues, serving as proxy for the sustainability managers. Those individuals help promote sustainability, provide feedback, and reinforce sustainability practices among their colleagues

extending the impact of sustainability initiatives. Thus, the leadership sustainability managers enact is less about enforcing compliance and more about inspiring and empowering others, actions that have also been identified in other studies (Abraham, 2024; Graves and Sarkis, 2018). They further work towards aligning business and sustainability goals by fostering collaboration, and creating conditions where sustainability becomes a shared responsibility across the organization.

In summary, this thesis shows that sustainability managers need to bring people on board, influence executive board members and find ambassadors, all of which is done to make organizational members complicit in their sustainability efforts. Each time organizational actors follow, the sustainability manager's guidance becomes a manifest of the sustainability manager's leadership. Thus, by fostering behaviors that prioritize sustainability, sustainability managers shape others' internal motivation, which in turn lays the foundation for future engagement in sustainability initiatives (Robertson and Carleton, 2018).

However, to gain sufficient influence and grant priority to sustainability, the leaders are expected to develop competences at the operational, strategic, cognitive, and ethical levels, all at once. Paper II and Paper III contribute to this discussion. Paper II describes how it is no longer feasible for sustainability managers to be responsible for all issues coming under *sustainability umbrella* (such as biodiversity, carbon capture, to name a few) as well as for reporting requirements due to CSRD and EU-Taxonomy schemes. The interviewed sustainability leaders highlighted that advancing sustainability in business development requires a reconfiguration of their roles and changes to organizational structures. They further claimed that sustainability management roles can no longer be treated as a purely support function, instead they must be legitimized as strategic sustainability work.

Nevertheless, to embed sustainability as the core of a business strategies and development, the prevalence of profit over value must be challenged (Battilana et al., 2022). This necessitates fundamental changes of existing business models or the development of new business models for sustainability that reflect strategic intention to meet sustainability goals (Fonseca et al., 2021). As exemplified in Paper III, sustainability leaders suggest doing this by translating sustainability objectives into concrete actions, such as embedding sustainability requirements into project planning, financial management (for example, using carbon budgets), and resource-efficient practices. The interviewed sustainability leaders emphasized the importance of making sustainability a natural part of everyday work, rather than treating it as an add-on. They also provided specific solutions to help organizations advance sustainability in their organizations. For example, they recommended that financial risks associated with sustainability initiatives should be managed at the company level rather than within individual projects. This approach, according to them, not only reduces the burden on single projects but also fosters innovation and enables broader adoption of sustainability practices across the organization. Another way in which the sustainability leaders pursue the advancement of sustainability is by challenging traditional views on products and services and promoting innovative, out of box, thinking on value propositions.

Successful alignment of sustainability and business requires empowered sustainability leadership. However, this thesis demonstrates that sustainability managers' mandate to lead is not granted once and for all, but rather depends on organizational needs, present challenges, external pressures and on which institutional logic is temporarily central (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). Sustainability managers need to gain organizational legitimacy to lead, which they do through continuous efforts on developing and maintaining followership. This thesis shows that sustainability managers act as sustainability leaders, exhibiting consistency, integrity and inspiring others to think and do more than minimum. Moreover, sustainability managers promote sustainability vertically by bringing everybody on board and horizontally by reaching out to individuals in executive roles. Acting as spokesperson for sustainability, the sustainability managers enact reflexive leadership, as outlined by Alvesson et al. (2017). The sustainability leaders recognize that sustainability transition cannot be achieved by themselves and acknowledge intensified, due to new regulations and the broadening scope of sustainability issues, need for collaboration with other professionals. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that the romanticized view of leadership, described by Meindl et al. (2025) as uncompromised ability to control and influence the future of the organization, does not fully reflect the realities observed in the context of sustainability managers' work.

7.2 Trajectories for sustainability leadership evolution

Sustainability leadership focuses primally on balancing social, environmental, and economic goals (Sajjad et al., 2024). Currently sustainability expertise is most often centralized, and sustainability management staff is organized as a support function. However, in the light of increased demands on corporate sustainability performance, manifested in new sustainability regulations and a broadened scope of included issues, centralization of responsibility for sustainability is no longer feasible. Therefore, sustainability managers anticipate changes to strategic sustainability work as well as to their role as sustainability leaders.

Findings from Paper II illustrated that the anticipated evolution of sustainability managers' role is tied to changes in organizational structures and external pressures. Figure 1 visualizes a dual trajectory for the anticipated evolution of the sustainability manager role. It also depicts an outlook on sustainability leadership typologies that are needed for sustainability managers to employ in the two non-exclusive future trajectories. As a result of the centralization of sustainability, sustainability managers often need to rely on external pressures, such as legislation, as a proxy to legitimize and authorize their leadership. Specialization, as an anticipated future, instead implies that the sustainability managers' role will shift towards the one of expertise coordinators, who collaboratively navigates sustainability as generalist and qualified partner. Specialization represents a renewed approach to how sustainability issues have been managed previously with the difference that what was once treated as a special interest for a small group is now envisioned as a broader, cross-disciplinary initiative. The second anticipated future, democratization necessitates the evolution of the sustainability managers' role into that of facilitators and catalysts, promoting the integration of sustainability responsibilities both vertically and horizontally throughout the organization, embedding these responsibilities into the duties of all organizational roles.

Current: Formalization
Centralized organization

Role of sustainability manager:
- Support
- Controller
- Auditor

Type of leadership: Compliance driven*

Trends and challenges

Anticipated future: Specialization
Divisionalized organization

Role of sustainability manager:
- Collaborative
- Generalist
- Coordinator

Type of leadership: Transformational, Reflexive

Anticipated future: Democratization
Decentralized organization

Role of sustainability manager:
- Participative
- Facilitator
- Catalyst

Type of leadership: Responsible, Reflexive

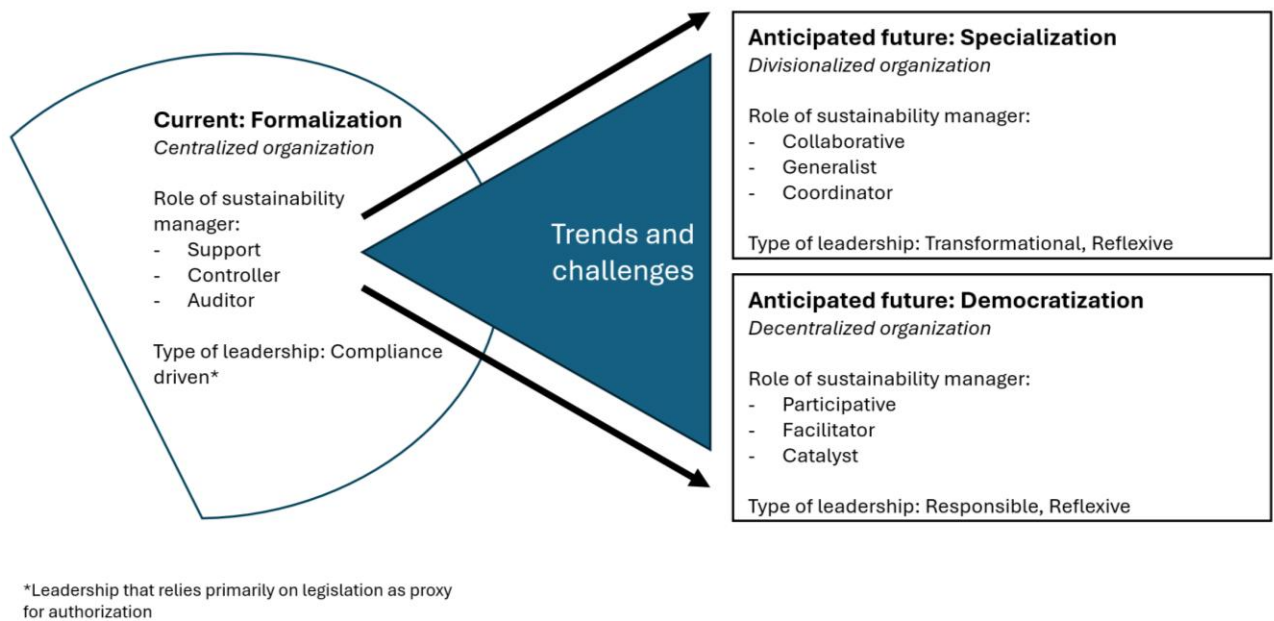*Leadership that relies primarily on legislation as proxy for authorization

Figure 1. The dual trajectory of anticipated futures for development of sustainability leaders

However, these anticipated futures carry implications for sustainability leadership. For instance, in response to the introduction of the new regulations and widening scope of sustainability issues, sustainability leaders anticipate a need to reform the constellations of professionals who will work with sustainability issues. One such constellations entails assembling a team of specialists who are experts in various sustainability issues. This scenario necessitates moving from concentrating sustainability responsibilities within a single, centralized support team to building a structure around specialized roles. Such structure enables broader distribution of expertise and responsibility for sustainability across an organization. Such a model enables different individuals or groups to focus on specific aspects of sustainability, making sustainability work more comprehensive and integrated. This scenario necessitates transformational sustainability leadership since it implies that sustainability leaders need to inspire, coordinate, and empower others in addition to managing a team of sustainability specialists. Transformational sustainability leadership in this context means guiding the organization towards sustainability transition, fostering collaboration across specialized roles, and ensuring that individual efforts align with the broader sustainability vision (Graves and Sarkis, 2018). Additionally, the sustainability leader's role entails facilitating communication between experts, bridging gaps in understanding by clarifying meaning, and creating a shared sense of purpose that transcends departmental boundaries. In many ways, leading a team of sustainability specialists requires enacting reflexive leadership. This evolution highlights not only the importance of adaptability and strategic vision simultaneously, but also of fostering reflexive followership (Alvesson et al., 2017).

The second constellation described by sustainability leaders includes the involvement of all the organizational actors throughout organizational hierarchies and departments. This means that sustainability management needs to be distributed horizontally and vertically across the organization. In this anticipated future, sustainability management is expected to become a

shared responsibility that extends beyond designated managers or specialists. This shift is reflected in expectations that employees throughout the organization will participate in sustainability initiatives, contribute to reporting processes, and engage with requirements such as the CSRD and EU Taxonomy. In this view, the role of sustainability leaders is therefore likely to evolve from controlling to facilitating and enabling. Sustainability leaders become catalyst for sustainability by connecting and supporting others in taking responsibility for sustainability work. This development points at a need for sustainability managers to serve as role models, which necessitates responsible leadership, grounded in ethical principles and a commitment to balancing organizational objectives with broader societal and environmental responsibilities (Maak and Pless, 2006). Responsible sustainability leaders coordinate organizational efforts to advance sustainability, demonstrate transparency and accountability, work towards easing the tensions between short-term business objectives and long-term sustainability goals. By serving as role models, responsible leaders embed sustainability values into the organizational culture, fostering a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility.

To involve all employees in sustainability efforts, sustainability leaders may need to embody the *5Ps of doing leadership*: acting as a prophet, preacher, psychotherapist, party host, and pedagogue (Alvesson et al., 2017). As *prophets*, sustainability leaders articulate a clear and compelling communication that inspires others to act. This includes sense-giving, which as outlined by Ludvig et al. (2013) concerns shaping how others understand, prioritize and act on sustainability related information. As *preachers*, sustainability leaders advocate core values and ethical imperatives. Fostering employees' sustainability values is important because as demonstrated by Graves and Sarkis (2018) transformative leadership resonates the most strongly with employees whose values are aligned with sustainability principles. Acting as a *psychotherapist*, sustainability leaders help others navigate the complexities and uncertainties of ongoing changes introduced due to intensifying sustainability demands. In this role, sustainability leaders support handling stressful situations and conflicts that may arise, because different professional groups may act along different professional logics (Gluch and Hellsvik, 2023). Furthermore, when coordination becomes challenging, stakeholders tend to focus on prioritizing their own benefits (Holti,2011), in which case providing emotional support and understanding becomes important aspect of sustainability leaders' role. The 5P's of doing leadership by Alvesson et al. (2017), emphasizes that leaders should undertake a *party host* role. By performing this role sustainability managers make themselves approachable and create inclusive spaces, where dialogue and collaboration, bringing together diverse stakeholders and encouraging open exchange of ideas are celebrated. Finally, sustainability leaders act as a *pedagogue*, which means that they allocate tasks, educate, mentor, and empower others (Opoku et al., 2015). Through these multifaceted roles, sustainability leaders may move beyond traditional authority, becoming catalysts for engagement, sense-making, and shared responsibility throughout the organization. This holistic approach not only supports the distribution of sustainability work but also strengthens the collective commitment to sustainable transformation.

Both in specialization future and in democratization future sustainability managers envision themselves as leaders. They describe leading highly specialized professionals in the

sustainability team in one of the anticipated futures. Or else, they see themselves orchestrating entire organization where sustainability work is democratized, becoming everybody's responsibility. Although the futures were described as something that shall come due to intensified sustainability work and widening of sustainability as a field, they can be interpreted as desired futures where sustainability managers are legitimate leaders with granted mandate for leadership.

8. Conclusions and contributions

This chapter summarizes the key conclusions drawn from the thesis and the three included papers. It highlights the main contributions and discusses their implications for both practice and theory. Finally, it presents pathways for future research.

8.1 Conclusions

Although numerous conceptualizations of leadership have been proposed (Abraham, 2024; Brandt 2016; Graves and Sarkis, 2018; Maak and Pless, 2006; Whyte et al., 2025), few of them consider leadership as a processual phenomenon that accounts for the co-constitutive relationship between leadership and followership (Alvesson et al., 2017, Tourish, 2018). However, the relationship between leadership and organizational structures as mutually constitutive phenomena remains unexplored in existing research. Through qualitative inquiry and the application of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), this thesis demonstrates how sustainability leadership and organizational structures coevolve, influencing one another as evolution progresses. Thus, the evolution of sustainability leadership is shaped by the interplay between individual agency and organizational structures, suggesting that leaders must both challenge and adapt to existing systems to embed sustainability values more deeply within business development. Examination of anticipated futures through future making lenses shows how sustainability leaders respond to regulatory pressures (such as CSRD and EU-Taxonomy) and discusses what kind of leadership is needed to drive sustainability issues forward in each of these futures. It also highlights the need for organizations to adapt by either deepening specialization or democratizing responsibility for sustainability across different organizational departments, units and roles. Furthermore, organizational structures need to be transformed to empower sustainability managers to participate in strategic decision-making.

The findings of this thesis demonstrate the complexity of sustainability managers' role as sustainability leaders. The study reveals that sustainability managers employ a range of strategies to embed sustainability into core business practices. These include targeting executive decision-makers, mobilizing broad organizational engagement, and finding ambassadors who champion sustainability initiatives. They also provide specific solutions and actionable steps to help organizations advance sustainability. Sustainability leaders challenge profit-centric approaches and traditional thinking of products and services. Moreover, they reflect on the need to progress their leadership developing several competences in relation to business development, such as in economy, finance, supply chain management, and business model design for more democratic involvement in strategic processes.

The thesis further concludes that business model thinking for sustainability is underdeveloped among sustainability leaders in the Swedish construction industry, with many sustainability leaders lacking both the mandate and expertise to meaningfully participate in business model design. As a result, sustainability values are not inherently embedded in business model processes, and prevailing dominance of profit over value is not (yet) challenged. Nonetheless, this thesis provides evidence that sustainability managers are still expected to be front line professionals for sustainable business development. Since their leadership is not enacted through formal authority, they instead need to rely on continuous negotiation of influence,

legitimacy, and engagement across multiple organizational levels to embed sustainability at the core of business development.

8.2 Contributions

This thesis builds on and expands prior literature on sustainability leadership in several ways. First, by examining strategic sustainability work employed by sustainability managers as sustainability leaders, the thesis advances the understanding of how sustainability leaders interact with various organizational actors to drive sustainable development (Paper I). Paper II contributes further by conceptualizing two anticipated futures for the evolution of the sustainability manager role: one involving increased specialization and the other involving the democratization of sustainability responsibilities across organizations. Paper III provides insight into sustainability leaders' views on business models for sustainability, revealing a spectrum of perspectives ranging from idealistic, pragmatic and ambiguous approaches.

As a theoretical contribution, this thesis and the included papers advance theory by demonstrating how structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) can be used empirically to study sustainability leadership. Applying structuration theory as theoretical lens to analyze the interplay between agency and structure, have surfaced how organizational structures such are norms, industry practices, and financial imperatives shape sustainability leaders' ability to influence business model for sustainability design. Through structuration theory lens it was shown that sustainability leaders seek to influence and mobilize other organizational actors in variety of roles.

This study contributes to theory building in management studies by combining structuration theory with the concept of future making. It does so to analyze how sustainability leaders anticipate their roles to evolve. The contribution lies in showing how agency and structure interact in shaping possible futures for sustainability management, emphasizing that anticipated futures are not only shaped by regulatory and organizational pressures but also by the reflexive actions and projections of sustainability leaders themselves. The study further enriches future making literature by distinguishing between desired and desirable futures, and by proposing that anticipated futures serve as a valuable analytical lens for understanding how sustainability roles may develop within the dynamic interplay of structure and agency.

For practice, this study provides actionable approaches that can be used by practitioners to overcome resistance (involving ambassadors for sustainability initiatives), foster engagement (bringing on all organizational actors on board), and negotiating prioritization of sustainability matters (targeting individuals with executive power). Moreover, this thesis offers a framework to anticipate how organizations as well as sustainability leaders' role may need to evolve in response to increasing complexity and regulatory demands. By identifying the dual pathways of specialization and democratization, the findings provide guidance for organizations to proactively prepare for new competence needs, refine job descriptions, and distribute sustainability responsibilities more effectively across teams and departments.

Moreover, this thesis contributes to practice by highlighting the need for organizations to strengthen sustainability managers' competencies in business model design, as many currently

lack both the mandate and expertise to meaningfully shape and develop business models for sustainability. The competence of these sustainability leaders is essential for organizations seeking to fulfil their sustainability commitments, remain competitive in markets characterized by limited resources, and further sustainable business development objectives.

8.3 Suggestions for future research

While this thesis contributes to knowledge about sustainability managers' leadership and how sustainability managers as leaders are important to advance sustainable business development, there are several research opportunities that were not explored.

Sustainability leaders' agency is not absolute. Leadership, as Tourish (2018) highlights, is an outcome of interactions among organizational agents, and thus it is an emergent event. Tourish has stressed that "*it makes more sense to see leaders and followers as interacting organizational actors whose identities as leaders and followers are simultaneously constructed and deconstructed by the force of their ongoing respective struggles to realize their agentic potential*" (2018, p. 226). Accordingly, moving forward, there are two potential pathways that further research could also explore the accounts of the followers on enactment of sustainability leadership. This potentially could be done by interviewing other organizational actors from outside of sustainability staff (such as project managers). The theme of the interviews could focus on following the dynamics of change in perception of leaders for sustainability and receptiveness to sustainability leadership.

Furthermore, although semi-structured interviews as a data collection method comes with several advantages, there are also other data collection methods that could have been adopted. For instance, participant observation, specifically shadowing, could enable deeper exploration of sustainability managers' daily work, including their interactions with other organizational actors. For example, it would be valuable to observe how sustainability leaders promote prioritizing sustainability. This would enable the investigation on what factors support and foster other organizational actors' readiness to embrace sustainability leadership. Additionally, given the perspective that leadership is an ongoing, never fully accomplished process (Tourish, 2018), it may be valuable to employ a longitudinal study as a research method in the continuation of this PhD project. Exploring how leadership emerges through social negotiation and renegotiation, construction and reconstruction, as an outcome and/or despite of conflicts resolutions and breakdowns, would be informative.

Sustainability, by its very definition, is inherently future-oriented (Brundtland Commission, 1987). Consequently, more research is needed to explore how anticipated futures are interpreted and reinterpreted within organizations, and how these interpretations can inform strategic change and the ongoing evolution of sustainability work and practices (Kemp & Martens, 2007). Building on the theoretical contributions discussed in Paper II, future empirical research could, for example, delve further into the distinction between desired and desirable futures, as well as the dynamic interplay between them. For example, a longitudinal study could investigate how trajectories of sustainability leadership, particularly in relation to the two anticipated futures *specialization* and *democratization*, impact corporate sustainability performance over time. Additionally, interviewing organizational actors outside of the

sustainability staff would provide valuable insights into how different stakeholders envision the future of sustainability work in comparison to sustainability leaders. Such comparative inquiry would not only highlight differences and similarities but possibly also enrich the ongoing discussion about the nature and implications of desired versus desirable futures.

Finally, while diverse perspectives that sustainability managers hold regarding business models for sustainability were outlined in Paper III, this alone does not exhaust the topic. Challenging existing business models and dominant thinking of value propositions is a prerequisite to integrating sustainability into the core of business (Robinson et al., 2011). It istherefore important to go beyond current frameworks and explore why business model for sustainability discourse is immature or nearly missing. Therefore, future research should move beyond descriptive accounts and investigate the underlying reasons for this immaturity. Similarly, a longitudinal study would be suitable to examine how different organizational interventions can empower sustainability managers to engage actively in business model design. Such research would help illuminate pathways for elevating value beyond profit and advancing the sustainability transition within the construction industry.

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