

Special Issue Call for Papers

Toward Society-Centred Responsible Leadership: Perspectives on Theory, Practices, and Challenges

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Societies and businesses experience interconnected grand challenges and sustainable crises from the COVID-19 pandemic to the surging climate concerns evolving into disputes about the future of working and living conditions. In light of corporate mismanagement and scandals accompanied by failing states and weak governments, social and political pressures are mounting on corporations to be responsible in their decision-making and corporate purpose (Suddaby, Manelli & Fan, 2023), within which leaders play a fundamental role (Grint, 2024; Tourish, 2020; Wickert, 2021). Multiplying calls are voiced by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners for a form of responsible leadership (RL) that takes into account not only different stakeholder groups (Maak & Pless, 2006; Doh & Quigley, 2014; Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014; Waldman & Siegel, 2008) but also the multiplicity of risks around our natural, social, and political environments (Pless, et al, 2022; Waldman, et al., 2019) in the decision-making of corporations (de Bettignies, 2014; Maak, Pless & Voegtlin, 2016).

Against this backdrop, RL research has proliferated. Existing studies have broadly agreed that responsibility in RL should be understood as *broader* than those in other leadership theories. Being responsible refers to stakeholder values rather than those of shareholders (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Tsui, 2021), enabling the investigation of the shifting antecedents, processes, and consequences of RL in varying contexts toward sustainable development, rather than merely on organizational outcomes dominated by firm performance and strategy consideration. Research on RL has made important progress in this regard and identified key distinctive elements. As a starting point, we interpret RL to have, *inter alia*, the following qualities:

- It is inherently values-based and manifests through various value lenses (Maak & Pless, 2006; Maak et al., 2016; Stahl, & Sully de Luque, 2014);
- It is consistent with and expands “traditional” definitions of leadership in that it implies leaders are “responsible *for something toward* someone”. This shifts the emphasis from influence/manipulation to features, degrees and operationalization of leadership accountability/care/liability (Pless, Maak & Waldman, 2012; Voegtlin et al., 2020);
- It connects closely with stakeholder theory and the stakeholder view of the firm in that it implies attention and responsiveness to the widest range of stakeholders (Doh, & Quigley, 2014). While stakeholder theory is frequently used in existing studies, we do not mean that RL can only be interpreted through this theoretical lens (see the first debate below and its exemplary questions);
- It is primarily a dynamic and interactive construct that incorporates leaders and stakeholders; as such it is not a leader-centric but a processual and interactive model that seeks to balance accountabilities and responsibilities (Maak & Pless, 2006).

However, despite these commonalities, the rising significance and proliferation of RL constitute increasing debates in our existing understanding of its concept, practices, and implications. This special issue aims to bring forward four debates on RL that to date are not well understood and warrant our further attention. In the four debates below, we encourage different perspectives and multi-level analyses of society-centred RL. By multi-level analyses, we encourage papers that are developed from different levels (e.g., micro-level; macro-level) of analysis or draw on a cross-level analysis.

The first debate lies in the **conceptual clarity** of RL where the existing understandings of ‘responsibility’ and ‘stakeholders’ are centred. The broader and heterogenous understandings of ‘responsibility’ in RL have hindered its conceptual clarity, to the extent that the meaning of responsibilities might be void. Responsibility within the literature has been broadly viewed as deriving from some characteristic or trait of a ‘responsible’ leader (Cameron, 2022; Freeman & Auster, 2011), relational processes of interactions (Maak & Pless, 2006; Patzer, Voegtlin & Scherer, 2018), and shared and collective processes (Kempster & Carroll, 2015; Pearce et al., 2014). Yet responsibility voids may exist when a group of stakeholders is collectively responsible for some outcomes while no member can be held individually responsible for it (Duijf, 2018). It is, therefore, crucial to develop multi-level theoretical perspectives by considering the dynamism of responsibility at different levels, across levels, or at the intersection (e.g., connections; tensions) between different levels, such as how individual-level meanings and value of ‘being responsible’ are constituted, disrupted, and transformed into ‘being irresponsible’ at a collective level or as an organizational process (Miska et al., 2013; Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014).

Besides the understanding of ‘responsibility’, RL has largely been conceptualized from the perspective of leaders, particularly how responsible leaders influence various stakeholders, rather than from the stakeholder perspectives as to how these stakeholders perceive and experience such influence. There seem to be disconnections between the enactments of RL and the interpretations and perceptions of its value. The disconnections risk narrowing our

understanding of RL as excessively positive and all-inclusive (Alvesson, 2020; Blom & Alvesson, 2015). While the roles of stakeholders are increasingly acknowledged in the literature (Pless & Maak, 2022), there is limited direct exploration of the perceptions and experiences of different stakeholder groups who constitute processes of RL. Our limited understanding of the interrelations and possible tensions between stakeholders and responsible leaders in understanding 'responsible leadership' raises the questions of what 'counts' as a responsible leader or leader responsibility.

The second debate calls for **empirical investigations** of RL from a relational perspective involving different stakeholders and cultural contexts. The focus on stakeholders in the existing literature has drawn on the micro-foundations of RL in relation to individual behaviour and processes (Maak et al., 2016; Varma, 2011), whereas the constitution of RL in intra-organizational cooperation and collaboration toward social responsibility and sustainability has been overlooked. Moreover, the different or perhaps contradictory understandings of RL have overlooked the influence of a specific cultural context upon which a study is based. A wide range of cultural and societal traditions and movements can fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of RL (Berger, et al., 2011; Miska, et al., 2013), including how the practices of RL can be organized and how it can build trust, authenticity, and credibility for stakeholders. This cultural context can be connected to the specific moral traditions and philosophical positions rooted in the context, which shape the meaning and practices of RL and its perceptions of stakeholders. Such influence of moral and cultural traditions in turn can shed light on the first debate calling for a multidimensional conceptualizing of RL.

The third debate raises questions about the **dark sides** of RL. For example, some studies question whether RL is constructing an alternative romantic of leadership (Collinson, et al., 2018; Kempster & Carroll, 2016; Zueva-Owens, 2019). Collinson et al (2018) have pointed out that the romanticised rhetoric has been reintroduced into RL, where hope and imaginations are promoted in terms of uncritical main concepts such as 'doing good' and 'growing well' (Kempster & Carroll, 2016, p.3). These promoted hope and imaginations can allow hypocritical or unethical leadership practices that are contradictory to their sustainable and responsible claims to be hidden in plain sight (Fan & Christensen, 2024; Nyberg, 2021), reducing or escaping from stakeholder or public scrutiny. RL, in this sense, can be the trigger or enabler of organizational wrongdoing and corporate social irresponsibility (Waldman, et al., 2020). Furthermore, some other studies reveal the dark sides of RL through the struggles and burden of leaders to cope with the tensions brought by RL (Zueva-Owens, 2019). This debate raises an important but under-explored issue about the hidden actors, processes, and practices (e.g., across individual leaders, organizations, and policy structures) of the dark sides of RL and their potential solutions.

The fourth debate surfaces the questions around **methodological innovation** in studying RL. Moving away from investigating traditional leader-follower relationships, in most cases centring around the influence of supervisors on subordinates, RL conceptualizations promise a more inclusive view of leadership influence. However, current empirical research on RL, while building on the conceptual aspiration of broader stakeholder inclusion, still falls short of realizing

its promise. Most research follows traditional leadership research, studying the “usual” employee- or firm-related outcomes of leadership influence. Part of the reason for this narrow focus is the lack of creativity in choosing the variables of interest and gathering valid and reliable data. To make RL research relevant, it needs empirical studies that take its conceptual promises of moving from a business-centric to a society-centric focus seriously (Wickert, 2021), and innovative methods to accompany those. We thus advocate for experimenting with a plurality of methods to study RL, including for instance process studies, in-depth investigations of relationships, historical studies, laboratory and field experiments, survey research that focuses on stakeholders besides employees, and the investigation of exogenous shocks and scandals that call for RL.

We believe that the topic of RL is predestined for cross-disciplinary research and for thinking beyond established boundaries. Complex problems require complex answers, and we therefore encourage the dialogue between scholars from a variety of disciplines to engage with management research. We could, for instance, envision fruitful collaborations of management scholars with scholars of political science and public administration, to tackle questions related to the influences of the political process of RL in business firms and the impact of policy implications; with scholars from philosophy and legal studies to explore the understanding of responsibility in RL; with sociologists and (social) geographers to investigate the relation between growing populism and nationalism and RL. This is not an exhaustive list, but it reflects the variety and breadth of contributions that are relevant to developing impactful solutions.

We invite conceptual and empirical submissions drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives and diverse methodologies to expand our theoretical and empirical understanding of the multi-dimensional practices and processes of RL. The following topic areas highlight exemplary questions and research themes:

1. Conceptual and Theoretical Development of Responsible Leadership

- While there are many commonalities among definitions of RL (see above), the concept and construct are still emergent. What clear and consistent definitions of RL can be agreed upon and what elements may vary according to context? How can RL be clearly delineated from related constructs such as inclusive leadership and servant leadership?
- How do we theorize ‘responsibility’ in relation to RL by drawing upon theories from philosophy, political economy, management, and other fields? How can we understand responsible leadership as multidimensional through, for example, ethical, moral, legal, social, and other dimensions?
- How might we integrate theories previously used to understand RL to offer novel theoretical perspectives that help us understand this phenomenon?
- Is ‘irresponsible leadership’ the flip side of ‘responsible leadership’? How do responsibility and irresponsibility intersect and reproduce each other in the process of RL?

- What is the potential dynamism (e.g., tensions; connections) of RL across levels or at the intersection of different levels, such as when the understanding of responsibility is transformed from an individual value to an organizational process?
- Are responsibility and RL theorized differently in Western and non-Western philosophical and moral traditions?

2. Empirical Exploration of Responsible Leadership: Leaders, Stakeholders, Intra-Organization Collaborations

- How do leaders deal with tensions, such as responsibility and irresponsibility, secrecy and transparency simultaneously, in generating and maintaining RL? What are the approaches responsible leaders use to manage or reconcile tensions and contradictions?
- What might be the complexities, contradictions, and tensions experienced by different stakeholder groups in relation to RL? What are the distinctive judgements and assessments of RL from different stakeholder groups, such as employees, consumers, social movement groups, non-governmental organizations, and governments? How does a particular stakeholder group respond to and cope with these complexities, and what are the implications?
- Do stakeholder groups express and exercise their resistance to RL? If so, how and under what conditions?
- How does a local context, such as specific cultural conventions and expectations, legal requirements, and organizational circumstances (e.g., amid an organizational scandal), shape relevant stakeholders' evaluation and perception of RL, such as its claims and practices toward authenticity, legitimacy, credibility, and transparency? How do such evaluation and reception reshape the meaning and forms of responsible leaders?
- What symbols, narratives, rituals, and embodiments might be at play in shaping stakeholders' perceptions and judgments of responsible leaders and RL? How are alternative imaginaries and imaginations of RL generated and translated into the lived experiences of stakeholders?
- How does RL constitute intra-organizational collaboration toward sustainability goals, and vice versa? What conditions of organizational structures and stakeholder relationships are important for such a constitution to function effectively?

3. Dark Sides of Responsible Leadership

- What challenges and crises do leaders face when coping with social and environmental problems? What might be the downsides of such coping?
- What might be the counter-sustainable consequences, such as manipulation and exploitation, of RL?
- Are there possibilities that RL is being transformed into a form of authoritative and coercive leadership?
- What is the influence of politics and local policy in (unintentionally) contributing to particular dark sides of RL, such as corruption?

4. Methodological Innovation in Studying Responsible Leadership

- When shifting the focus from leader-follower dynamics to leader-stakeholder dynamics, what are the distinct challenges and opportunities for the development of new methodologies? How can this methodological development and innovation be achieved?
- What are antecedents, moderators, and outcomes, but also relations and processes that are specific to an understanding of RL that focuses on the influence of leadership beyond employees? And how can we study those?
- How can we investigate RL as a multi-level phenomenon?

These are by no means an exhaustive set of questions, and we invite submissions that cover other issues and topics that fall within the four debates of this special issue.

SPECIAL ISSUE WORKSHOPS

- Pre-submission workshop: Online workshop via Zoom. Further information will be circulated in due course;
- After the first R&R decision: In-person workshop at the School for Business and Society at the University of York, UK.

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