

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE OF SPANISH AND POLISH LEADERS. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Ewa Wójcik, PhD
University of Economics in Katowice, Poland

Elena Bulmer, PhD
EAE Business School in Madrid, Spain

Abstract: *The Anthropocene, the human age developing along industrialization has affected the environment to an unprecedented extent. For contemporary businesses to achieve a competitive edge and attract investors, it is necessary not only to be financially efficient but also to address environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) goals. The market valuation is increasingly based on other than tangible assets and market participants expect profit will be generated with ethical conduct, the value created for all stakeholders, and meeting social goals to achieve common well-being and a better future. It is well aligned with CSR principles and sustainable development goals, the frameworks of XXI century company operation. In this environment, leadership is a challenge to be inclusive of all stakeholders often with conflicting views. Moreover, globalization demands an expansion of organizational borders and the embracing of a variety of cultures. Technological advancements and innovations demand constant adaptation, improving qualifications of the staff that will need support, assistance, and mentoring. Sustainable leadership, therefore, requires a wide range of new skills and a multidimensional approach. The paper is a comparative study based on research carried out among Spanish and Polish leaders in 2022-2023. Its results provide insight into how a role of a leader is perceived in the two countries EU members and examine the main differences between their views and activities.*

Keywords: *ESG, sustainability, sustainable leadership, triple bottom line, bee sustainable leadership philosophy*

Introduction

Over the years the number of adjectives to prefix leadership has been increasing. This linguistic phenomenon is determined by processes, and concepts in the centre of attention to reflect the dynamics of things, describe individual intentions, the behaviours involved, or the nature of the outcomes. (Bendell and Little, 2015). The adjectives that seem to be particularly apt in mirroring today’s changing and dynamic nature of leadership and its environment are Situational and Transformational. However, considering the contemporary business environment, the term Sustainable Leadership is increasingly relevant. Individual intentions, in this context, are aligned with sustainable development goals and the business triple bottom line results.

The triple bottom line approach, which assumes profit is only one of the three aspects of business success, reflects the fundamental pillars of sustainable company conduct. While economic responsibility and profit maximisation are critical for



shareholders and any business activity, without compromising their profit generation, companies also need to show commitment to people, serving society and to the planet. Sustainable leadership (i.e., synonymous with responsible leadership) emphasises the positive social impact of the decisions made in an organisation. Financial considerations should not be prioritised over moral values. In this approach processes of managing the relationship between leaders and stakeholders are based on ethical norms and values, and oriented towards common goals. This is a means of strengthening motivation and commitment to building sustainable value and socially engaging change (Pless, 2007).

From the point of view of market participants' decision-making about investment in a particular business, it is important to be able to understand what material impact environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors may have on a company's performance.

Crews (2010) indicates the inclusion of all stakeholders, while considering their conflicting views, is essential for organisations oriented toward sustainable development. Such inclusivity also refers primarily to the most vulnerable groups, including employees, who need support in building awareness of the principles of sustainable development, as well as training, re-skilling, and up-skilling to ensure their sustainable employment. The inclusion of customers and clients, and the obtention of their engagement and trust contribute to long-standing relations helpful in building a positive company image and reputation.

In today's world of increasing expectations of all stakeholders and a need to evaluate different aspects of a company's activity from various perspectives, with financial reporting as a core but not the only criterion, the role of a leader has gained new dimensions. Sustainable leadership should focus on employees' engagement to get them familiar and compliant with the principles of sustainability and simultaneously be aligned with sustainability principles at the citizenship stage. Practical implementation of this multidimensional business strategy and operations requires building the competencies of leaders (Rok, 2014). To describe the nature of this approach the term total sustainability management seems adequate.

According to Amato and Roome (2009) the processes of integrating sustainability into the organisation should be aligned with the processes of expanding organisational borders to embrace a multilevel and variety of cultures. The integration of sustainability in an organization enables leaders to take responsibility and minimise risks for the company and society. Furthermore, the latter should be accompanied by the development of new solutions based on technological and organisational innovations that enable meeting economic, social and environmental goals.

Leadership for sustainability requires leaders to have extraordinary abilities. They should be able to operate through complexity, think through complex problems, engage groups in dynamic adaptive organisational change and have the emotional intelligence to adaptively engage with their own emotions associated with complex problem solving" (Metcalf and Benn, 2013).

Hargreaves and Fink, (2004) point to seven core principles of sustainable leadership that are indispensable: sustained learning created and preserved, success secured over time, sustained leadership of others and issues of social justice addressed, human resources developed rather than depleted, environmental diversity and capacity developed, and activist engagement with the environment undertaken.

Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) depict steps to be taken toward implementing sustainability at the organizational level in a Pyramid (Fig.1 below). The first level is the Foundation Practices level which entails practices that can be introduced at any

time by the organizational management. Higher-level practices can build up after the right foundation practices have been established. The third level is linked to the lower ones, thereby depending on the foundation and higher-level practices, and are based on the latter. The fourth level comprising performance outcomes best describes sustainable leadership.

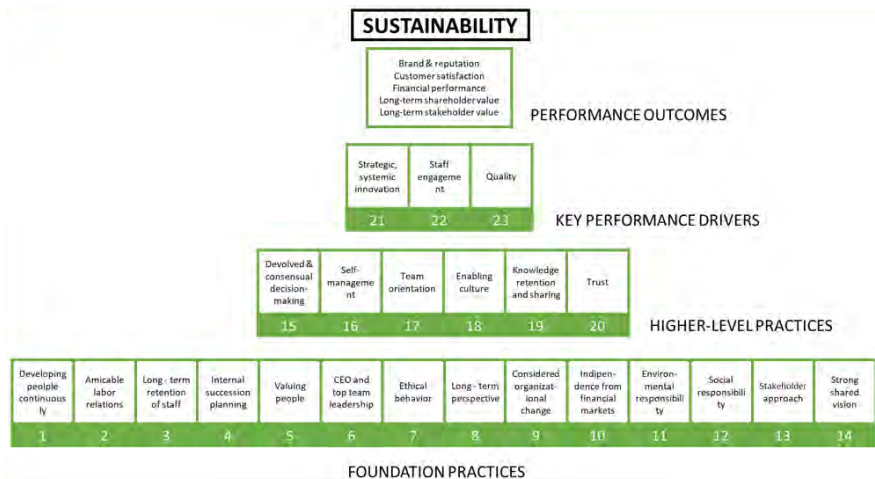


Fig 1. Sustainability Leadership Pyramid

Source: Avery and Bergsteiner (2011)

The research in Spain and Poland aimed at comparing how leaders of the two European Union member countries implement the commonly shared goals and values of the organisation pursue toward sustainability, how far they are advanced in integrating sustainability in their activity and which elements they address. Avery and Bergenstein’s (2011) sustainable leadership framework has been used for the development of this study as will be described in the Methods section of this manuscript. The results of both studies are described in the Results section of this article and analysed in the Discussion. Conclusions are presented at the end of this article.

Methods

Avery and Bergsteiner’s framework (2011) was used as a basis for the methodological approach undertaken. The model is based on 23 key factors that underlie the concept of sustainable leadership and which, if carried out together, will contribute over time to improving organizational performance.

A qualitative quantitative study was carried out based on the analysis of the answers given by Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in both Spain and Poland who responded to the 54-point questionnaire described below. For the Spanish side of the study, 77 CEOs were interviewed, and for the Polish side 23. Moreover, the Polish study was carried out over two consecutive years, with the first attempt presenting the same questions but exposing the respondents to an ultimate choice of „yes/no” answer. This stage embraced 36 respondents. The responses, although not directly comparable, may “shed” light on leaders’ attitudes when confronted with the need to decide between the two extremes.



The questionnaire used was based on the sustainable leadership model of Avery and Bergsteiner, with the pertinent modifications made to adapt it to the peculiarities of our research. Of the 54 questions posed, 46 (Part II) analysed the level of sustainable leadership of the company in which the different managers worked and 8 questions (Part I) were introductory, seeking to learn a little more about the profile of each manager interviewed. The 46 questions presented in Part II analysed the level of sustainable leadership and were broken down into three main categories: fundamental practices (questions 1 to 26), top-level practices (questions 27-38), and key performance drivers (questions 39-46). The 46 questions of Part II are listed below:

1. In terms of training and development I aim to develop everyone continuously.
2. In terms of training and development I aim to develop people selectively.
3. For me, long job tenure is very important at all levels.
4. At some level I can accept a high degree of personnel turnover.
5. I mostly make promotions from within the organization wherever possible.
6. I mostly appoint people from outside the organization wherever possible.
7. I am concerned about employees' welfare.
8. For me employees are interchangeable and employee cost is a very significant cost item in accounting.
9. In my opinion a CEO works as the top team member or as the representative of the team.
10. In my opinion a CEO is a decision maker and can be considered as the person in charge.
11. "“Doing the right thing”" in the business is more important than profit.
12. For me, assessable risks can be taken in any situation to increase profit.
13. I prioritize long-term business objectives over those that are short term.
14. I prioritize short-term profits and growth considerations.
15. I think that change is an evolving and considered process.
16. I think that change is something rapid, volatile, perhaps even ad hoc.
17. I think that people should work with maximum independence from others to increase the profits from their work.
18. I think people should follow their managers and obey instructions.
19. In setting business objectives, I always emphasize protecting the environment.
20. In my opinion, the environment is there to be exploited to increase profit.
21. I think that the interests of the people and of the community within the business environment should be carefully considered in making business decisions.
22. I think the people and community should be exploited since they are available to the business to increase profit.
23. I think that everyone matters, whether they are related to the business or not.
24. I think, since we are in business to generate profits, that only shareholders matter.
25. I believe in vision statements embodying a shared view of the future as an important strategic tool.
26. I believe that a vision of a shared, consensual future does not necessarily drive the business.
27. I believe the decision making in the business should be consensual and devolved.
28. I believe the decision making in the business should be primarily manager centred.
29. I believe staff are capable of self-managing.
30. I believe managers should manage and control staff.
31. I think team working should be extensive and empowered.
32. I think team working should be limited and manager centred.

33. I think widely shared culture fosters and enables the meeting of business objectives.
34. I think the pursuit and the achievement of short-term business objectives constitutes a valid business culture.
35. I believe the sharing of knowledge is especially important and should be practised throughout the organization.
36. I believe that knowledge-sharing is important only to the extent of a need-to-know basis with people having access only to what they need to fulfil their specific roles in meeting the overall business objectives.
37. In business I need to foster a high degree of trust through relationships and good will.
38. In business we must control and monitor staff to compensate for a low trust environment.
39. In my opinion strategic innovation is especially important and therefore should be encouraged at all levels of the organization.
40. In my opinion, innovation is risky and therefore should only be managed by managers.
41. I highly value emotionally committed staff.
42. In my opinion, financial rewards suffice as motivators, therefore I do not expect emotional commitment from the staff.
43. In my opinion, quality ought to be embedded within the culture of the business.
44. In my opinion, quality may only be achieved through mechanisms of control.
45. I effectively communicate the business culture and the strategic actions to be developed.
46. I understand that the functions of the workers on my team are easily achievable using new technologies, and that using them can eliminate jobs.

The questionnaires were created using Google Forms, to be able to send them digitally by email and WhatsApp, given the context of the COVID- 19 pandemic and the difficulty in being able to carry out face-to-face interviews. Interviewee anonymity was always guaranteed.

Each of these questions was evaluated via a Likert scale with a range of 1 to 5 (i.e., each of these range levels is further explained in Table 1 below):

Table 1. Survey question range level explanation

Range Level	Explanation
1	I completely agree.
2	I agree.
3	I do not agree or disagree.
4	I disagree.
5	I completely disagree.

Results

Avery and Bergsteiner’s framework (2011) was used to evaluate the level of sustainable leadership among CEOs in Spain and in Poland. Below the results are analysed for (1) the CEOs in Spain and (2) the CEOs in Poland.



Spanish CEO Results

Most CEO interviewed (question 1, 84.8%) considered that continuous training and development were important, and this training had to be carried out selectively (question 2, 81.9%). 77.3% of respondents acknowledged that long job tenure at all levels was essential. A result worth highlighting is that 97% of CEOs interviewed recognized that they tended to promote employees within the organization whenever possible, while all of them acknowledged that they cared about their staff. Their vision however of how the staff should operate at work varied. There were mixed responses (i.e., and no majority) to the following two statements, “I believe that people should work with maximum independence from others to increase efficiency” and “I believe that employees should follow and obey managers” demonstrating that the CEO still needed to have a certain degree of control over his/her employees.

Most CEOs admitted that doing “good” was more important than making a profit (74.2%) and that long-term goals needed to be prioritized rather than short-term ones (65.2%). Furthermore, 88.5% agreed with the following statement, “I believe that a vision, a shared view of the future is an important strategic tool”. A surprising result was that most interviewees (71.3%) responded positively to the following statement, “I believe it is possible to take risks in any situation to increase profit”. This last statement may contradict the point about “doing good” and might be misinterpreted. 69.4% of respondents contemplated that change was positive and should be welcomed, while agreeing with the statement, “I believe that change is a process that is always being considered and evolving”.

86.4% of the CEOs interviewed considered environmental protection when setting up their business objectives. Likewise, all respondents regarded that the welfare of the local community should be considered when conducting business activity. In this sense, most interlocutors (90.9%) thought that every person was important whether connected to the business and considered that the shareholders were not the only ones that mattered (87.8%). Furthermore, most respondents (66.7%) believed that decisions in the company should be made in a consensual and decentralised manner, while 98.5% regarded that teamwork should be expanded and strengthened as much as possible. Additionally, 98.5% believed that knowledge sharing is not important; it is sufficient to achieve goals if only some people have knowledge in the organisation. Surprising result was that most respondents (92.4%) acknowledged that they did not appreciate emotionally involved employees.

Polish CEO Results

The Polish results were divided into two parts. The first presents the initial survey results that were based Avery and Bergsteiner’s 23 sustainable leadership elements, however based on True/False answers, while the second reflects the results using a Likert scale to analyse the same 23 elements. The latter results were used to make comparisons with the Spanish results.

Initial survey results

In the previous year’s study, the percentage of leaders ready to train and develop all individuals was very high at over 86%, with two-thirds of respondents supporting the selective development of staff. A slightly lower percentage of respondents (48.2%) did not accept staff turnover at a certain level, but this group considered long tenure important (55.6%). Like in the previous study, a high percentage (over 90%) of the interviewees preferred promoting employees from within the organisation, and they thought they cared a lot about the welfare of employees (94,4%). Also in this study,

most interviewees (over 61%) did not consider the CEO the only decision- and opinion-maker.

Given the choice of only „yes” or „no” answer, the group of respondents considering doing good as more important than making profits was slightly lower (42.8) than this of the opposing view. However, a different stance to risk was demonstrated in this study with 80,6% of the interviewees indicating risk can be taken in any situation to make a profit.

A vast majority of interlocutors also in this study considered long-term perspective to be more important than short-term profits as well as change being an evolving process and always considered. Regarding the general opinion of the importance of environmental protection, it did not vary in the two studies. Three-quarters of this previous year’s respondents admitted they included environmental protection in their business objectives and an even higher percentage of them indicated that the environment should not be used for maximising profits. Additionally, almost all interviewees presented a thoughtful stance to local society and its good to be taken into consideration in business activity. Most of them (63.9%) also disagreed that it could be used for generating profits. Just like in the other study, interlocutors agreed with the importance of every person irrespective of being a member of the organisation or not. They also expressed their agreement about the shared common view being an important strategic tool and disagreement with the opinion of shareholders being only important for business leader. Consensual and decentralised decision-making was favoured by over 60% of interviewees and a forward-looking vision was believed to drive business activity by nearly 70%.

The respondents disagreed, though, about the decision-making process so while most of them (77.8%) believed employees can self- manage, the same percentage regarded managers should manage staff.

Interestingly, while nearly all respondents in this study valued strategic innovations and thought they should be supported at all levels, they also considered them risky and as such to be managed only by managers.

As regards strong preference of teamwork and attitude toward trust, this study’s results did not differ.

Results of Polish CEO surveys using Likert scale

Most of the CEOs interviewed (60.8%) said that in terms of training and development, they strived for the continuous development of all individuals. 56.5% of respondents did not accept high staff turnover levels, while a large number were undecided (39.1%) when they were asked whether job tenure was important at all levels. Moreover, most interlocutors (78.2%) confessed that they mostly promoted employees from within the organization whenever possible. Additionally, all interviewees admitted they cared very much about the welfare of their staff. The question regarding the role of the CEO in an organization implied mixed results. In the respondents’ opinions, the CEO was not necessarily a leader and an expression of the opinion of the whole team, nor a decision-maker that could be considered a protagonist. Associated with this result was how the employees should act at the operational level in their job. 48.7% of the CEOs interviewed felt that people should work with maximum independence from others to increase efficiency (i.e., with 34.8% undecided), while there was no clear stance regarding the statement that staff should obey and follow their managers.

The neutral stance was the most prevalent when the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “Doing good in business is more important than profit, while the majority (52.2%) disagreed with the statement that it was possible to



take risks under any situation to increase profit (i.e., the latter being more aligned with the philosophy of bee sustainable leadership). Furthermore, 60.9% of interviewees considered that long-term goals needed to be prioritized over short-term ones. Very much aligned with this last result, 78.3% of the interlocutors believed that change is a process that is always being considered and evolving. 66.5% admitted that they always consider environmental protection when setting their business objectives, while 65.2% disagreed with the statement that the environment was there to be used to increase profits. On the social side, 87% of respondents considered that the welfare of the local community should be considered when conducting business activity and that every person is important, whether connected to business or not (69.5%). Furthermore, almost all interviewees (95.6%), understood that a shared view of the future is an important strategic tool. In this respect, 73.9% of respondents acknowledged that teamwork should be expanded and strengthened as much as possible, while all CEOs interviewed believed that wide dissemination/knowledge of the organisational culture is conducive and enables the achievement of business objectives. Additionally, the role that trust plays in an organization is worth highlighting. 91.3% of interlocutors regarded that trust through relationship building and goodwill is important in business. Finally, it is interesting to note that 86.9% of respondents recognized that strategic innovation is very important and should therefore be encouraged at all levels of the organisation.

Discussion

Among the factors that have had a pivotal role in both today's company performance and sustainable practices are behavioural aspects of leadership. Firstly, the leader can be perceived as a role model to incorporate sustainability into business practice. Secondly, the leader's traits should stimulate and enable sustainable behaviour of all staff. Research by Catalyst revealed that having an empathetic leader favours innovation (61% of employees reported being able to innovate when having an emphatic leader), engagement (76% of respondents who experienced empathy reported higher engagement). Another benefit of respect and understanding by leaders is reportedly higher staff retention which is a foundation of sustainable employment. A perception of a leader as an empathetic individual was understood as an additional guarantee of inclusivity, work-life balance and support given to employees (Van Bommel, 2021).

The main objective of this research was to analyse how Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in Spain and Poland perceived the level of sustainable leadership at their companies, and how it fits within the model of sustainable leadership of bees and locusts formulated by Avery and Bergsteiner (2011). The results of the study demonstrate that leadership among CEOs in Spain and in Poland is now more inclined towards the bee sustainable leadership philosophy. The honeybee leadership approach provides a vision of social leadership with the involvement of all stakeholders. It is more holistic in nature, is based on generating value for all stakeholders and thus is aligned with the seventeenth Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations (i.e., SDG 17), that of creating global alliances. Although it has been shown that the application of bee leadership in companies is more sustainable and profitable in the long term, many national and international companies continue to apply a more conventional model, such as the locust model, prioritizing short-term benefits.

Most of the CEOs interviewed in Poland and Spain seemed to care for the training and development of their team. Furthermore, most tried to promote internal promotions whenever possible. The results highlight that the CEOs seemed to watch out for not only the wellbeing of their employees but showed an interest in caring for all organizational stakeholders; from shareholders to the community surrounding the organization as well. It aligned with ethical leaders' conduct typical of combining independent individual rules of ethical conduct with business efficiency. Meeting all ethical norms by individual employees and managers is not sufficient, though. Responsibility as the core feature of a leader demands engagement at all levels and within all business processes and it should be a global process. It involves motivating staff, conflict resolution, but also auto-creation, and strengthening the soft competencies of a leader. They are critical for empowering individuals, giving room for decision-making and accountability that are necessary to implement such values in a corporate strategy.

The study respondents proved to understand the above considerations by stressing the importance of making decisions in a decentralized manner, and that the latter should be strengthened as much as possible.

Leaving room for manoeuvre is critical in organisations for staff to be able to follow. Prime and Salib (2014) note that “followers” are also leaders. The first follower turns a person into a leader! Followers are leaders, and in fact, inclusive leaders make space for others to lead, by following them”.

Most Spanish and Polish CEOs admitted that doing “good” was more important than making a profit, thereby highlighting those long-term goals that needed to be prioritized over short-term ones. Furthermore, they believed that a shared view for the future was an important strategic tool. Its relevance was highlighted by Collins (2001) who conducted analyses of the top companies with long-run, sustained existence as market leaders. It was concluded such market success can only be achieved by organisations with a level five boss who has an ability to raise successors. Collins claims such leaders share the quality of being humble, focusing on the company rather than their own ego. They are not of high profile or outgoing, but strong-willed and determined with their sights set on the company they are running.

According to Maxwell (2013) a path of a leader can be visualized as mastering consecutive levels of a pyramid where the first stage is entered by inexperienced leaders who can then go through higher levels up to the top one – the Pinnacle- which is only attainable at the end of the path for a few- the most competent leaders. The first level is available for a leader who is given the post and is technically able to perform the role assigned. At level two a leader needs to be given employees permission to lead, which implies relationships with people are established based on trust. A leader with emotional intelligence will be able to build bonds with people strong enough for them to be ready to follow. The next stage can be entered when people notice and value the leader's contribution to the organisation. Appreciation of the results makes them pursue their leader. At level four, people will develop under the leadership to grow by mentorship, coaching and training opportunities. This development is created to enable succession and provide for long lasting success of the organisation. Level five leaders are so much integrated with the organisation that they go beyond their personal ego and ensure succession.

Collins (2001) also emphasises the critical role of people and claims that first is the „who” factor rather than „what”. Right people come first, and then right tasks need



to be assigned together with targets specified to be achieved. Therefore, the right people are assets, not just people.

To fully utilise employees' potential, leaders should make sure they are independent and well-trained. As such, they can offer much more than obedience. Moreover, leadership to embrace and respond to the changing relationship between workers and organisation must rely on more than a single person. Leaderful organisations need to be founded on principles of mutual- rather than heroic-leadership. It is more than merely consultative leadership with leaders allowing followers to participate (Raelin, 2003).

Sustainability is expressed through long-term impact achieved by succession and deep learning into core values rather than superficial effects. On the other hand, broad influence and leadership are achieved through distributed responsibility. Sustainable leadership needs to accommodate justice and diversity that replaces standardisation. (Hargreaves and Fink, 2005). Most Spanish and Polish CEOs admitted "that long-term goals needed to be prioritized rather than short-term ones. This very much characterizes the bee sustainable leadership philosophy which prioritized long-term benefits over short-term ones.

Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to compare the views and opinions of Spanish and Polish leaders and consequently their attitude to sustainable leadership. Bearing in mind the prominent role assigned to business sustainability, leadership style seems fundamental to purposefully and competently combine individual intentions, with sustainable development goals and the business triple bottom line results.

The study results show Polish and Spanish leaders' vision of sustainability is related in a vast majority of aspects. They seem to share the EU prerogative of implementing long-run perspective favoured over short-termism and profit maximisation. Similarly, based on the research, leaders of the two countries declare to strive for continuous training and development of all staff, prefer promoting staff within the organisation, and attract a lot of importance to their welfare. Sustainable employee management was also mirrored in the negative attitude of the CEOs interviewed to high staff turnover. The difference was noticed, however, in a view of long job tenure which was only seen as important by most Spanish leaders, but by the Polish ones less so.

There was no decisive stance considering the level of independence of staff: while it was agreed staff independence can maximise their efficiency, a leader's role as a controller was also stressed. Such an attitude may signify leaders examined in the two studies in Poland and one in Spain were not entirely ready to fully empower their staff. The drive to maintain control was demonstrated in the leaders' preference to take decisions regarding innovative solutions perceived as risky ones.

Both country leaders perceive trust as a critical component of relationship building and respect local societies in their business activity. They also agree about the importance of environmental protection in decision-making process.

Different attitude was shown toward emotional engagement which was highly valued by Polish leaders while the Spanish interviewees had an entirely opposing view.

The result demonstrates that the path toward sustainable leadership has been followed by leaders in the two countries. Its certain aspects, such as care about the environment, local society and staff development are taken for granted. Decision-making processes, however, are still not shared with employees and leaders show

preference to be final decision-makers. While certain parts of the decision-making process may be taken over by other staff members, the leaders are not ready to empower employees which may pose a barrier to sustainable management.

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