

# **Social Impact, Organizations and Society**

The Contemporary Role  
of Corporate Social Responsibility

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## **Understanding the role of ethical leadership for social impact**

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# 4 Understanding the role of ethical leadership for social impact

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## Introduction

In today's world, organizations are being called upon to take responsibility for how their operations impact societies and the environment (Quinn & Dalton, 2009). Consequently, many strive to achieve more remarkable and better social impact. In this field, the role of a leader is crucial. Organizations' leaders influence various outcomes – including turnover, customer satisfaction, sales, revenue, productivity, and more. However, appropriate leadership also creates employee's engagement and passion, which lead to higher levels of customer loyalty, service, innovation, and ultimately profits, all together translating into a potentially positive social impact. As a subject of academic study and research, social policy has given rise to a rich interdisciplinary field of analysis with a distinctive body of theory, concepts, and methods that have underpinned timely, relevant, and valuable research (Yeates & Holden, 2022). However, the existing research largely omits the importance of leadership for its social impact. Drawing on the recent definition put forth by Stephan et al. (2016), the social impact may be defined as beneficial outcomes resulting from prosocial behavior enjoyed by the intended targets of that behavior and/or by the broader community of individuals, organizations, and/or environments. According to Rawhouser et al. (2019), most definitions conceptualize social impact as engendering “positive” social change (e.g., Santos, 2012; Stephan, Patterson, Kelly, & Mair, 2016), while others define social impact in terms of the reduction of negative impacts (Bartling et al., 2015). Social impact means any significant or positive changes that solve or at least address social injustice and challenges. Businesses or organizations achieve these goals through conscious and deliberate efforts or activities in their operations and administrations that should be governed by ethical leaders.

An ethical leader is one who aims to achieve moral good and one for whom the core values of integrity, trust, respect, fairness, transparency, honesty, and morality are central. Morals, ethics, and sustainable leadership remain increasingly challenging to organizations as they adapt to changing regulations in an

expanding global market (McCann & Sweet, 2014). The fundamental task of ethical leadership is to promote and establish an ethical culture within the organization (Saha et al., 2020). Ethical leadership means that individuals behave according to a set of principles and values that are recognized by the majority as a sound basis for the common good. Ethical leaders provide the optimal setting for employees by inspiring, developing, and establishing a culture of trust and respect. It entails building a culture of accountability and responsibility within its processes, systems, and people. Ethical leadership results in higher employee satisfaction, trust, commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff et al., 1996). The top management's ethical leadership significantly forecasts the ethical climate, further affecting firm-level organizational citizenship behavior and economic performance (Shin et al., 2015). The employees under ethical leadership are anticipated to identify cost-saving methods to achieve a solid triple bottom line, including people, planet, and profit (Roeck & Farooq, 2018). Additionally, firms governed by ethical leadership are expected to attain more external legitimacy and a positive brand image based on their responsible and sustainable business practices (Wang et al., 2015).

An ethical leader inspires others to behave ethically and affects change towards moral goals. Strong moral leadership is crucial for companies to shift their direct involvement to fulfill the needs of financial stakeholders as well as of different stakeholder groups by delivering goods, services, and values to local communities and the needy and poorest of society.

Recently, the concepts of ethical leadership and social responsibility of companies that translate into social impact have acquired a crucial role in the competitiveness of firms operating in both manufacturing and service industries (Khan, Ali, Olya, Zulqarnain, & Khan, 2018; Roeck & Farooq, 2018). Corporate scandals, like Enron, Lehman Brothers, and Anderson – to mention a few – have raised public awareness of ethical leadership and its social impact (Wu, Kwan, Yim, Chiu, & He, 2015). Simultaneously, the globalization of business is one force that makes companies face increased pressures on the social impact resulting from ethical behavior and ethical leadership (Mishra & Schmidt, 2018). In the increasingly globalized market competition, firms are fighting for customers (Shashi, Centobelli, Cerchione, & Singh, 2019). Companies currently face a challenging management paradigm due to the context's pressures, namely intense competition, scarcity of resources, more informed and demanding consumers, progressive technological advances, climate change, and stakeholders' pressure (Silva et al., 2021). In this regard, ethical leadership and the social engagement of companies that translate into social impact may be essential factors that can lead firms to seek a competitive edge and build a clean brand image (Schinzel, 2018).

Moreover, rational consumers do not pay attention exclusively to products/services at the purchase point, but they also think about the sustainability engagement and social impact of the companies to follow (Saha et al., 2020).

Employees want to be part of an organization that is honest, fair, and reliable (Cacioppe, Forster, & Fox, 2008). Consequently, companies need an effective combination of ethical leadership and the organization's social impact to retain customers and employees. Hence, leadership that results in a social impact leading to sustainability requires leaders of extraordinary abilities. Metcalf and Benn (2013) indicate that it calls for leaders who can read and predict through complexity, think through complex problems, engage groups in dynamic adaptive organizational change, and have the emotional intelligence to engage with their emotions associated with complex problem-solving adaptively.

Although the corporate social impact has gained considerable interest in policy, academic, and practitioner debates, it is still unclear how leadership aspects such as behavior and ethics contribute to boosting corporate activities towards improving the life quality of the society. As leaders are critical organizational actors, understanding their role in social impact is necessary for sustainable development and improvement. Therefore, in this study, we formulate three research questions that will guide our analysis to understand the role of ethical leadership in social impact conducted on the basis of a bibliometric and structured literature review:

RQ 1 What is the state of art regarding ethical leadership and social impact?

RQ 2 What are the research gaps regarding ethical leadership and social impact?

## **Materials and methods**

To answer all RQs, we follow the phases of a systematic literature review developed by Secinaro et al. (2020). As the first step, we define primary keywords to search in the Scopus database. Initially, we put the expression *ethical leadership* and *social impact*, but we did not receive any results. We decided to expand our research using the final keywords, leadership and social impact, and we received 254 documents as initial results. Narrowing the research to three science areas: (1) business, management, and accounting; (2) economics, econometrics, and finance; (3) decision sciences and to the English language, we were left with 193 publications. Finally, choosing only scientific articles, the final sample consists of 139 papers for further analysis.

In the second phase, we collected all available information on our sample characteristics from the Scopus database. We converted the obtained files for the descriptive bibliometric analysis and created a matrix comprising all the documents. We also prepared the corpora with each abstract as a textual document ready for machine reading to analyze the keywords. In the third phase, primary, we used the open-source statistical application R for the descriptive bibliometric analysis. To expand our investigation, we applied bibliophily to develop a conceptual map, co-citation network, and WebSty developed by CLARIN-PL for the keywords' analysis. Next, in the fourth phase, the programs allowed us to obtain data reduction by using PCA and clustering. For the keyword analysis, WebSty uses the combined agglomerative-flat clustering method, recognized

as an effective method for text clustering (Piasecki et al., 2018). Finally, using visualization of the results of each step in our research, we concentrated on the data interpretation and finding answers to our RQs.

## Results

Until 2015, few articles were published yearly, with a single pick in 2011. In contrast, for the last six years, we can observe a constant increase in the number of research publications analyzing leadership and social impact, with the highest number obtained in 2021 (18 articles).

The keywords most frequently cooccur with leadership and social impact are human, sustainability, sustainable development, decision making, waste management, economic and social effect, female, innovation, and communication.

There are also changes over time in the main topics discussed in the academic literature. Firstly, the authors concentrated more on social impact than on leadership. Due to the increase in the number of publications in recent years, topics are fragmented, investigating leadership and social impact from the angle of sustainable development, decision-making process, innovation, and waste management.

Table 4.1 presents the results of keyword analysis based on the articles' abstracts. We receive five clusters that differ significantly from each other by the mean frequency of keyword occurrence. To understand the main issues in each cluster, we concentrate on the first 15 most frequently used words. Only cluster 3 and cluster 4 grouped research that investigates leadership and social impact within organizations. These two clusters are the subject of our more profound analysis to answer our RQ 2.

A total of 53% of publications (74 out of 139) in our sample belong to clusters 1, 2, and 5. In cluster 1, there are 22 papers that focus on the concept of leadership and social impact in education. Cluster 2 consists of 20 publications, where the main topics concentrate on well-being and community. Citizen, governance, and responsibility are the most frequent keywords in cluster 5, for which 34 articles were qualified.

Cluster 3 grouped 27 articles, with the most frequent keywords: briefing, thinking, organization, executive, originality, and community. It implies that the main common topic is the social impact and corporate leaders' role regarding the activities for the local communities.

There are 32 research papers in cluster 4, which makes it the second-biggest cluster in our analysis. Words that occur the most frequently are enterprise, entrepreneur, innovation, model, learning, identification, and profit, indicating that the main research topic in that cluster is looking at social impact and leadership through innovation projects that include learning in an organization and entrepreneur importance. In that cluster, the words profit, output, and outcome, associated with the evaluation of financial performance, appear.

Table 4.1 Clusters' characteristics and Mann-Whitney U test results

Feature	Cluster 1, N = 22						Cluster 2, N = 20					
	Keyword	p-value	Mean in	Std in	Mean out	Std out	Keyword	p-value	Mean in	Std in	Mean out	Std out
1	Education	0.00	0.45	0.57	0.03	0.18	Construction	0.00	0.28	0.57	0.00	0.04
2	Energy	0.00	0.36	0.82	0.01	0.11	Well-being	0.00	0.24	0.59	0.00	0.00
3	Student	0.00	0.54	0.81	0.06	0.27	Concern	0.00	0.15	0.24	0.02	0.11
4	Excellence	0.00	0.22	0.80	0.00	0.00	Community	0.00	0.44	0.39	0.09	0.20
5	Narrative	0.00	0.22	0.63	0.00	0.00	Inequality	0.00	0.18	0.38	0.01	0.06
6	Mean	0.00	0.11	0.25	0.00	0.05	Tourism	0.00	0.48	1.18	0.00	0.00
7	Project	0.00	0.42	0.65	0.06	0.23	Resident	0.00	0.12	0.36	0.02	0.23
8	Balance	0.00	0.06	0.16	0.00	0.04	Infrastructure	0.00	0.17	0.33	0.01	0.09
9	Complexity	0.00	0.10	0.29	0.00	0.05	Cost	0.00	0.20	0.48	0.01	0.08
10	Curriculum	0.00	0.12	0.31	0.01	0.08	Population	0.00	0.26	0.64	0.02	0.18
11	Discipline	0.00	0.09	0.25	0.01	0.05	Resilience	0.00	0.27	0.61	0.01	0.10
12	Alumnus	0.00	0.05	0.15	0.00	0.00	Being	0.00	0.20	0.55	0.01	0.06
13	Competition	0.00	0.13	0.40	0.00	0.00	Waste	0.00	0.40	1.06	0.00	0.03
14	Moment	0.00	0.04	0.13	0.00	0.00	City	0.00	0.28	0.84	0.01	0.07
15	Workshop	0.00	0.05	0.17	0.00	0.00	Capacity	0.00	0.14	0.22	0.03	0.12

(Continued)

Table 4.1 (Continued)

Feature	Cluster 3, N = 27						Cluster 4, N = 32					
	Keyword	p-value	Mean in	Std in	Mean out	Std out	Keyword	p-value	Mean in	Std in	Mean out	Std out
1	Briefing	0.00	0.35	0.67	0.00	0.00	Enterprise	0.00	0.41	0.74	0.00	0.02
2	Thinking	0.00	0.39	0.66	0.01	0.05	Entrepreneur	0.00	0.29	0.62	0.00	0.00
3	Organization	0.00	0.30	0.38	0.07	0.23	Innovation	0.00	0.59	0.83	0.03	0.13
4	Executive	0.00	0.17	0.37	0.00	0.00	Model	0.00	0.27	0.50	0.04	0.15
5	Writer	0.00	0.17	0.37	0.00	0.00	Learning	0.00	0.18	0.51	0.03	0.19
6	Peer	0.00	0.38	0.88	0.00	0.00	Identification	0.00	0.05	0.16	0.00	0.00
7	Originality	0.00	0.17	0.25	0.02	0.09	Profit	0.00	0.10	0.31	0.00	0.00
8	Community	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.18	0.29	Donor	0.00	0.11	0.35	0.00	0.00
9	Status	0.00	0.17	0.35	0.01	0.09	Founder	0.00	0.07	0.21	0.00	0.00
10	Digest	0.00	0.16	0.39	0.00	0.00	Fund	0.00	0.08	0.29	0.00	0.00
11	Edge	0.00	0.16	0.39	0.00	0.00	Output	0.00	0.09	0.34	0.00	0.00
12	Globe	0.00	0.16	0.39	0.00	0.00	Outcome	0.00	0.16	0.29	0.04	0.17
13	Employee	0.00	0.23	0.50	0.03	0.23	Venture	0.00	0.12	0.32	0.00	0.03
14	Comment	0.00	0.16	0.35	0.01	0.10	Alignment	0.00	0.08	0.22	0.00	0.05
15	Design	0.00	0.24	0.33	0.05	0.15	Ecosystem	0.00	0.27	0.79	0.02	0.23

<i>Cluster 5, N = 34</i>						
<i>Feature</i>	<i>keyword</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>mean in</i>	<i>std in</i>	<i>mean out</i>	<i>std out</i>
1	Citizen	0.00	0.20	0.57	0.00	0.00
2	Governance	0.00	0.20	0.58	0.00	0.00
3	Responsibility	0.00	0.22	0.46	0.02	0.10
4	Observation	0.00	0.07	0.18	0.01	0.05
5	Integration	0.00	0.11	0.29	0.01	0.10
6	Government	0.00	0.23	0.45	0.05	0.16
7	Report	0.00	0.06	0.19	0.00	0.00
8	Journal	0.00	0.20	0.76	0.00	0.00
9	Culture	0.00	0.15	0.48	0.01	0.08
10	Care	0.00	0.16	0.59	0.00	0.05
11	Review	0.01	0.15	0.41	0.02	0.14
12	Issue	0.01	0.13	0.21	0.05	0.18
13	Sustainability	0.01	0.36	0.66	0.07	0.21
14	Fairness	0.01	0.06	0.25	0.00	0.00
15	Feedback	0.01	0.03	0.12	0.00	0.00

*Source:* Own elaboration.

Further investigation of Cluster 3 and Cluster 4 shows that of 59 articles, only three of them measure social impact: in Pasricha and Rao (2018), social impact is limited to the social innovation tendency among employees measured using eight items tool proposed by Bulut et al. (2013), two articles (Álvarez García et al., 2014; Calvo-Mora et al., 2018) use EFQM Excellence Model. Also, leader(ship) style and leaders' characteristics (features) are rarely evaluated. In one paper to evaluate features of ethical leadership, authors implement the Ethical Leadership Scale developed by Brown et al. (2005), which is a 10-item instrument based on the psychometric concept. In contrast, Al-Mansoori and Koç (2019) developed their own tool for verifying transformational leadership styles. Moreover, there is a very limited number of investigations linking leadership, social impact, and financial performance. The authors of three articles analyze: impact investing and social impact (Mogapi et al., 2019), social entrepreneurship leadership style and financial performance (Kelly et al., 2022), leadership practices and financial sustainability (Nguyen et al., 2021).

In the majority of publications, qualitative methods are used, with the majority consisting of case studies (13 articles), literature reviews (12 articles), and interviews (9 articles). Among quantitative methods, authors most often use questionnaires (5 articles) and structural equation modeling (3 articles).

## **Discussion**

The social impact of business refers to everyone in many ways. When businesses and organizations consciously choose sustainable ways to operate, there is a chance to improve the world on Earth. A positive societal impact must be a central component of corporate strategy rather than a by-product of success. Business organizations are uniquely positioned to tackle global issues, which can bring powerful advantages for the whole society. With social impact in mind, companies can now choose greener ways to operate and create less damage to society and the environment. The focus on social impact requires a good leader with an ethical mindset. Leadership is important because it inspires, motivates, and sets an example for people to accomplish positive changes in the company and the world. While running their business, leaders should seek to tackle our world's most complex challenges to create a positive social impact.

Our bibliometric and structured literature review shows a lack of papers investigating the role of ethical leadership in social impact. In recent years, we can observe an increase in publications exploring leadership roles and social impact, which confirms the understanding of that topic's importance among scholars. However, until today, the early stage of research development is present, resulting in numerous works using qualitative methods, characteristic of explorative studies.

Using cluster analysis of abstracts and their careful reading, we identify the main research gaps: role of ethical leadership for social impact, development

of ethical leadership evaluation measures, development of leadership role in social impact evaluation measures, development of social impact evaluation measures, the link between ethical leadership, social impact, and financial performance. There is also an absence of quantitative research, comparative study, and long-run analysis. We believe that growing awareness of companies' role in enhancing activities in the social area and EU regulation changes pushing European economies towards sustainability will result in a significant growth of research binding ethical leadership and social impact together.

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