



***Systemic Servant Leadership and Sustainability: A Case Study of  
servant leadership implementation through a systems lens.***

***by***

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A PhD Thesis Submission

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**July 2025**

# Abstract

This study explores the evolution of Servant-Leadership (SL) into a Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) framework, addressing its limitations in navigating complexity, power dynamics, normative control, and scalability, in multinational organisational contexts. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a global values-led organisation, the study integrates Systems Thinking with SL to examine how leadership behaviours and processes adapt across contexts to enable navigating complex changes such as of corporate sustainability. It critically investigates how SL, while ethically grounded and community-oriented, can fall short in fostering analytical depth, structural adaptability, and contextual responsiveness when implemented at scale. Through a thematic analysis of interviews, documents, and organisational practices, using a systems lens, the study develops and theorises four systemic processes- Adaptive Learning, Integrative Communication, Systemic Innovative Collaboration, and Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation- that interact with six evolved SSL behavioural dimensions- Co-creating Values, Systemic Support & Development, Shared Moral Authority, Adaptive Serving, Interconnected Community-Building, and Developing Systems Awareness. These developments respond to contemporary business emergent tensions, particularly those arising from global standardisation, values alignment pressures, and regional disparities in practice.

The SSL framework is proposed to address key limitations in traditional SL by enabling dynamic feedback, distributing moral agency, surfacing context-sensitive insights, and integrating stakeholder perspectives across multiple system levels. The research highlights that a dual transformation- of individual leadership behaviours and organisational systems- supports more equitable, responsive, and sustainable leadership practices capable of navigating complexity and driving systemic change.

Ultimately, the study offers SSL as an empirically informed, theoretically elaborated and practically applicable framework for operationalising values-led leadership in complex, evolving organisational environments.

## **Acknowledgements**

The PhD journey has not been straightforward, but it offered me a great motivation and purpose to keep going no matter what. It was a growth trip with many ups and downs. It taught me resilience, perseverance and to take each day as it comes. Despite the hardship I went through, I am glad I took this journey to fulfil my dream, it proved an immense source of my personal development.

I want to thank my supervisory team, Dr Chapple, Dr Vivier, Dr Zhang and Dr Jalan, in no particular order, for their support in getting me this far. Their time, feedback and guidance have been valuable for my development as a researcher and are much appreciated.

A special thanks to Zara, Wassim and Rami, without your love I would not have even taken the journey. Thank you for being my rock and the light in my life that guides me through the down times. You are my greatest source of motivation; I love you so much and I hope this makes you proud!

Many thanks to all those who helped me, directly and indirectly, to keep going these past hard years, your kindness will not be forgotten.

Thank you all!

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
List of Tables and Diagram.....	8
Chapter 1- Research Introduction.....	9
1.1.    Background and Rational.....	9
1.2.    Case Study and Research questions.....	14
1.3.    Aims, Objectives, and Contributions.....	16
1.4.    Structure of the Thesis.....	20
Chapter 2- Conceptual Background and Approach.....	21
2. Introduction.....	21
2.1.    Leadership in General.....	24
2.1.1.    The Emergence of Ethical Leadership.....	25
2.1.2.    The Transition to Relational Leadership.....	26
2.1.3.    The Shift towards leadership for complexities and Systems Cognisance.....	28
2.2. Servant-Leadership (SL).....	34
2.2.1. Origins of SL.....	34
2.2.2. Conceptualisations and measurements of SL.....	37
2.2.3. SL and change processes.....	45
2.2.4. SL Criticisms and Implementation Challenges.....	49
2.2.4.1. Conceptual Foundation and Theoretical Challenges.....	49
2.2.4.2. Performance Impact Challenges.....	50
2.2.4.3. Power Dynamics and hierarchal Structures Challenges.....	51
2.2.4.4. Contextual and complexity Challenges.....	54
2.3. Systems Thinking (ST).....	57
2.3.1. ST and Complexity.....	58
2.3.2. ST and Ethics.....	60
2.4. SL and the notion of ‘Wholeness’: <i>A Systemic- Servant Connection</i> .....	61
2.5. Exploring Systems Thinking as a practical Lens for Servant-Leadership Implementation.....	65
2.6. Systemic Servant Leadership: <i>A pathway to Corporate Sustainability (CS)</i> .....	70
2.7. Summary.....	74
Chapter 3- Methodology.....	76
3.1. Research Philosophy.....	76
3.1.1. Ontology and Epistemology.....	77
3.1.2. Systemic Storytelling: <i>Bridging Ontology and Epistemology in complex contexts</i> .....	80

3.2. Research Design and Methodological Approach .....	82
3.3. Case Study Strategy .....	84
3.4. Data collection Approach .....	86
3.4.1. Case Participants Sampling.....	86
3.4.2. Case study context .....	90
3.4.3. Data collection.....	92
3.4.3.1. First stage: Secondary data .....	93
3.4.3.2. Second Stage: Semi- Structured Interviews .....	94
3.4.3.3. Interview guides and administration.....	95
3.5. Thematic Analysis.....	97
3.6. Ethical Considerations .....	102
3.7. Research Rigour .....	103
3.8. Summary .....	106
<i>Findings &amp; Discussion</i> .....	107
<i>Background of the Analysis</i> .....	107
Chapter 4- Part 1: The Accounts of Behaviours .....	110
4. Introduction: .....	110
4.1 Theme 1: Aligning Values .....	111
4.1.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents” .....	111
4.1.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders” .....	114
4.1.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers” .....	117
4.2. Theme 2- Coaching and Support .....	120
4.2.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents” .....	120
4.2.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders” .....	122
4.2.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers” .....	125
4.3. Theme 3- Partnering Leadership .....	129
4.3.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents” .....	129
4.3.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders” .....	131
4.3.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers” .....	135
4.4. Theme 4- Situational Adaptability .....	138
4.4.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents” .....	138
4.4.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders” .....	140
4.4.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers” .....	146
4.5. Theme 5- Building Community .....	151
4.5.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents” .....	151
4.5.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders” .....	155

4.5.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers” .....	166
4.6. Theme 6- Expanding Awareness .....	174
4.6.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents” .....	174
4.6.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders” .....	177
4.6.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers” .....	182
4.7. Executive Summary .....	186
Chapter 5 - Part 2: The Process of Change .....	189
5. Introduction .....	189
5.1. The Underlying Processes .....	190
5.1.1. Integrative Communication .....	190
5.1.2. Adaptive Learning.....	197
5.1.3. Systemic Innovative Collaboration .....	202
5.1.4. Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation.....	208
5.2. The Change process Pathway.....	213
5.3. Executive Summary .....	220
Chapter 6- The integrated research .....	223
6. Introduction.....	223
6.1. Key Insights from The Case Study .....	224
6.1.1. Theoretical Limitations of SL and The Need for Operational Framework .....	227
6.1.2. Structural and Analytical vulnerabilities and The Need for a Balanced Dual- Level Evolution.....	231
6.2. Organisational Tensions and The Evolution towards SSL.....	238
6.2.1. Normative Control Tension: <i>From Alignment to Co-Creation</i> .....	240
6.2.2. Power Imbalance Tension: <i>From Influence to Shared Authority</i> .....	249
6.2.3. Complexity Navigation Tension: <i>From Situational Responsiveness to Systems-Aware Leadership</i> ..	260
6.2.4. Scalability Tension: <i>From Idealism to Systemic Implementation</i> .....	269
6.3. The Emergence of The SSL Framework: <i>A Dual-Level Pathway for Sustainable Implementation</i> .....	282
6.3.1. Evolved Dimension: Embedding SSL at the Individual Level .....	285
6.3.1.1. Co-Creating Values: <i>Moving beyond imposed norms to shared ethical understanding</i> .....	285
6.3.1.2. Systemic Support & Development: <i>Building distributed growth opportunities</i> .....	285
6.3.1.3. Shared Moral Authority: <i>democratising influence and decision-making</i> .....	286
6.3.1.4. Adaptive Serving: <i>Enabling nuanced responsiveness to diverse contexts</i> .....	286
6.3.1.5. Interconnected Community-Building: <i>Extending SL’s localised unity into a broader relational system</i> .....	287
6.3.1.6. Developing Systems Awareness: <i>Cultivating holistic understanding of interdependencies</i> .....	287

6.3.2. Systemic Organisational Processes: Embedding SSL Structurally.....	288
6.3.2.1. Integrative Communication: <i>Ensuring transparent information flow and systemic awareness.</i> ..	288
6.3.2.2. Adaptive Learning: <i>Driving continuous adaptation and innovation.</i> .....	288
6.3.2.3. Systemic Innovative Collaboration: <i>Fostering cross-contextual problem-solving and scalable solutions.</i> .....	288
6.3.2.4. Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation: <i>Providing robust feedback loops for continuous improvement.</i> .....	289
6.3.3. The systemic outcomes: <i>Critical Tensions Resolution.</i> .....	289
6.3.3.1. Enhanced Scalability .....	290
6.3.3.2. Contextual Responsiveness .....	291
6.3.3.3. Balanced Power Dynamics .....	291
6.3.3.4. Complexity Navigation .....	292
6.3.3.5. Integrative Value of the Four Outcomes .....	294
6.4. The key Ingredients' Contribution to Self-Sustained Systemic .....	294
Implementation: <i>Shaping Culture, Capacity and sustainability</i> .....	294
6.5. SSL for CS: <i>Navigating Corporate Sustainability as a Complex Context</i> .....	300
6.6. Conclusion.....	306
Chapter 7- Thesis Conclusion .....	308
7. Introduction.....	308
7.1. Relating to The Research Questions.....	309
7. 2. Key Contributions of The SSL Framework .....	314
7.2.1. Theoretical Contribution .....	314
7.2.2. Practical Contribution .....	316
7.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research.....	318
7.4. Final Reflection: <i>SSL as a Framework for Leadership in a Complex, Sustainable Future</i> .....	321
References .....	323
Appendices .....	338
Appendix 1: <i>Fortune's Best Companies to Work for With Servant-Leadership.</i> .....	338
Appendix 2: <i>Leaders' interview guide questions</i> .....	344
Appendix 3: <i>Employees' Interview guide questions</i> .....	346
Appendix 4: <i>Leaders' participant information sheet and signed consent form</i> .....	348
Appendix 5: <i>Employees' participant information sheet and Signed consent form.</i> .....	351

## List of Tables and Diagram

Table 1- Overview of existing conceptualisations of servant-leadership.....	32
Table 2- The 7 pillars of servant-leadership (Sipe and Frick, 2009).....	36
Table 3- The participants and interview information.....	82
Table 4- Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage process to conduct a thematic analysis.....	92
Table 5- Examples of initial open-coding, simultaneously emerging from both groups.....	94
Table 6- Key Conceptual Principles of SL and ST underpinning this research analysis.....	102
Table 7- Organisational systemic Transformation Path.....	227
Table 8- The integrated contribution of the SSL ingredients to the long-term systemic SL implementation.....	291
Diagram. 1- The SSL Framework (Integrated Ingredients).....	289

# Chapter 1- Research Introduction

## 1.1. Background and Rational

In the contemporary global era marked by rapid technological advancement, growing interconnectedness, and socio-environmental complexity, the need for leadership that is ethical, sustainable, and adaptive has become increasingly pressing. Organisations today are under growing pressure to address global challenges, including social inequities, environmental degradation, and stakeholder well-being (Eva et al., 2019). These concerns have been further intensified by high-profile corporate scandals, such as those involving Enron and Arthur Andersen, which have brought leadership accountability into critical focus (Christensen et al., 2014). As a result, traditional leadership models have been criticised for failing to ensure ethical responsibility and long-term value creation, prompting researchers to seek alternative approaches that align more closely with stakeholder and sustainability demands (Voegtlin et al., 2012).

Servant-leadership (SL) has emerged as one such alternative model. First conceptualised by Greenleaf (1977), SL distinctively focus on service to others. It has been identified as a values-based, people-centred approach that places the needs of followers and communities above those of the leader (Laub, 1999). Its relational and ethical foundation has been positioned as particularly relevant for organisations seeking to address complex and evolving business demands (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Waldman, 2014; Kalshoven et al., 2011).

However, despite its normative appeal and strong relational foundation, SL continues to face limitations in both theory and practice. The literature increasingly identifies SL as conceptually ambiguous, structurally underdeveloped, and insufficiently equipped to navigate the fast-paced, performance-driven, and multi-stakeholder complexities of modern organisations (Eva et al., 2019; Liu, 2019; Gandolfi and Stone, 2018). Concerns regarding its scalability, strategic alignment, and viability within competitive or complex global environments persist to inhibit its wider acceptance. For instance, SL's prioritisation of followers' needs over organisational outcomes is often viewed as compromising performance or profitability, leading to concerns about its applicability in competitive environments (Andersen, 2009; Song, 2018). Sipe and Frick (2009) contradict this claims stating that, servant-led organisations led report higher employee satisfaction and commitment, which translate into improved operational outcomes over time.

Another area of concern pertains to power tensions where practitioners report such difficulty in balancing servant and leadership roles, especially in high-pressure situations or competitive environments (Urrila and Eva, 2024). McCrimmon (2010) highlights that servant-leadership can create confusion about who holds decision-making authority and may lead to delayed decisions in crisis situations. On the other hand, some empirical research has demonstrated that servant-leadership can actually enhance leadership legitimacy through service (Zhang et al., 2021). Furthermore, some scholars have argued that SL's relational ethos can inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles and paternalistic tendency, particularly in high-pressure or hierarchical contexts, which can inhibit genuine employee empowerment, and create overly dependent teams (Tilghman-Havens, 2018; Martinez and Leija, 2023; McCrimmon, 2010). Whereas many other studies like of Kool and van Dierendonck (2012) and Liden et al's. (2008), assert that SL prioritises followers' development into independent servant leaders themselves, highlighting that SL's emphasis on

relational trust and ethical behaviour can dismantle traditional gendered expectations in leadership.

Moreso, SL approaches have shown limited responsiveness to contextual variations across regions, which weakened its strategic impact in global organisations at scale. Large organisations, particularly in manufacturing or global operations, face significant difficulty translating SL's values into practices without clearer structural or contextual alignment (Rodríguez-Carvajal et al, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Its prescriptive nature was highlighted as often lacking the adaptability required for diverse organisational settings (Patterson, 2003). This can undermine its capacity to evolve with shifting strategic and local demands and operational complexities, making it difficult to sustain in competitive business environment. In such contexts, leadership must be able to adapt across regions, functions, and stakeholder systems, a flexibility that SL's static nature struggles to provide on a broader level beyond leader-follower dyad (Sun et al., 2024).

SL literature, is thus, plagued with many contradictions, resulting in limited understanding regarding the essence of its construct, led by many subsequent studies seeking to conceptualise, measure and demonstrate the positive outcomes of SL (Eva et al., 2019; Song, 2018; Van Dierendonck, 2011), incurring even more ambiguity. Eva et al (2019) concurred that this is because “an overwhelming majority of servant-leadership studies provide loose descriptions of what, why, and how servant leaders behave towards their followers as they do” (p. 114). For example, while Liden et al. (2014) proposes that servant leaders may engage in varied SL behaviours within their workforce, little research has explored the underlying mechanism through which these behaviours are supported. These limitations are important to acknowledge because they significantly impact SL's long- term relevance and viability in complex, dynamic, and diverse organisational settings.

Eva et al. (2019) highlight the lack of clear frameworks for implementation, leading to perceptions of SL being impractical for large-scale, competitive environments. Large organisations, in particular with expanded units, may struggle with SL's demands for deep relationship building and individualised attention (Zhang et al., 2021), reinforcing the view that servant-leadership, lacks a structural framework for sustained, scalable impact (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

These gaps call for a new framework, one that integrate SL's ethical and relational core with mechanisms adapted to new complex challenges, to address its implementation across varying contexts (Bragger et al., 2021; Urrila and Eva, 2024). Eva et al. (2019) argued that to enhance understanding of the relationship process between SL and outcomes at multi-levels, 'researchers should consider alternative theoretical perspectives' (p.124). In response, to address these gaps and enhance the long-term implementation of SL, this research explores the integration of systems thinking as a lens through which to examine the key ingredients of SL that fosters a sustainable systemic application at scale. Systems thinking (ST), as defined by Senge (1990), offers a holistic lens for understanding complex interdependencies within organisations, emphasising the interconnectedness of various elements and the importance of understanding how these elements influence one another. It provides tools for identifying feedback loops, anticipating unintended consequences, and fostering adaptability (Meadow, 2008).

While servant-leadership is widely acknowledged as a valuable leadership for its long-term positive impact such as on followers' performance (Hoch et al. 2018), team performance (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016), and organisational performance (Liden et al., 2014), its long-term viability depends on understanding how its principles function together in real-world organisational contexts. Leadership does not operate in a vacuum but is constrained by the

environment in which it operates (Eva et al., 2021). Addressing these constraints is therefore critical to enhance SL's strategic relevance, ensuring it can operate sustainably across diverse competitive settings and drive sustainable outcomes.

This research does not aim to add to the plethora of SL conceptualisations, rather to deeply explore the conditions that perpetuate its limitations, such as power imbalances tensions, amongst others, to directly address the root cause rather than the symptoms. For instance, Sun et al., (2024) suggest that SL's focus on leader attributes can potentially reinforce the hierarchical power structures. Empirical investigation in this study showed that over reliance on leaders helps to maintain power imbalances, with leaders often defaulting to directive approaches to navigate complexities. This reinforces the need to address the gap in understanding the underlying processes of SL influence at multi-levels (Bragger et al., 2021; Liden et al., 2008; Eva et al., 2019), which has limited research on its practical utility (McClellan, 2009). If these issues remain unaddressed, SL risks becoming confined to normative values and idealistic framing, without the supporting processes to embed them into systemic change.

This study, thus, proposes to reframe SL from mere individual attributes into systemic capabilities through the integration of ST. By viewing servant-leadership as part of an interconnected system, this approach not only aims to directly address critiques of its scalability and adaptability but also clarifies the barriers that impede SL application and the conditions that sustain it over time. ST offers a holistic lens to this research to explore how SL values can be translated into interconnected organisational processes that can reinforce its long-term sustainability. For instance, SL's distinct holistic nature (Sendjaya et al., 2018) and community-centred vision, (Liden et al., 2008)- although advantageous for enhancing SL's

ability in complexity context as they much align with ST's focus on the whole view and on interconnectedness- have long been neglected, diluting the model's transformative potential.

Through a systems lens, this study seeks to explore and identify the key ingredients that influence the successful implementation of servant-leadership, from organisational culture, follower/ leader dynamics to external stakeholders' engagement. The resulting developed framework- Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL)- aims to preserve the ethical foundations of SL while addressing its limitations through dynamic, systems-aware structure.

## **1.2. Case Study and Research questions**

To ground this analysis in practice, this research employs a qualitative case study of an international manufacturing organisation anonymised here as 'Company X', which has embraced servant-leadership as a core part of its leadership culture for over 25 years. It operates in over 130 countries, employing over 800 people, and is renowned for its innovative product lines, strong employee engagement and commitment to sustainability.

The choice of Company X draws on contingency theory (Woodward, 1958), which posits that effective leadership and organisational practices must align with the specific contingencies of the organisation, such as its structure, size, and environment. Given that SL has often been associated with smaller, US-based organisations (Peterson et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019), Company X, a large international organisation by contrast, offers an exemplary context to examine SL's scalability and sustainability in complex global environments.

Company X experience with servant-leadership highlights both its potential and its challenges. Over the past decade, the company has implemented several initiatives to support ethical leadership, community-building, and shared responsibility across its operations.

However, sustaining these efforts across its global operations has required iterative adaptation, trials and holistic innovation. Furthermore, the complexity of large organisations with multiple levels of management, departments and regions, can extend the distance between leaders, followers, teams and external stakeholder. This was found to lead to different pressures on SL leadership behaviours throughout, causing leaders to default to traditional approaches.

This study focus on the key factors and mechanisms underlying Company X's approach, such as community-building, empowerment, and shared leadership. It also examines how systems thinking has been used, either explicitly or implicitly, to address challenges and ensure alignment with corporate sustainability goals. Such understandings could add valuable contributions to knowledge on how leaders manage to build and enhance interconnections and collaborations within the global business communities. Accordingly, the main question guiding this research is:

*What are the key ingredients for the successful and sustained systemic implementation of servant-leadership in international organisations, and how it contributes to advancing corporate sustainability?*

This question reflects a shift from the philosophical and abstract debates of servant-leadership to a more pragmatic focus on its operationalisation within real-business settings. By studying Company X's implementation of SL, this research seeks to explore the key elements and processes involved in the long-term success, as well as the potential role of systems thinking

in enhancing its long-term implementation and scalability. Three sub-questions further assist this study:

*Srq1: What key elements characterise the long-term practical enactment of servant-leadership in the exemplary international organisation?"*

*Srq2: How can systems thinking help clarify the key elements and processes required for the successful implementation of servant-leadership?*

*Srq3: To what extent can a systemic implementation of servant-leadership facilitate organisational-level corporate sustainability?*

These questions support a multi-level exploration of servant-leadership as it is enacted, sustained, and embedded in organisational settings, and how such practices can contribute to broader sustainability goals. By analysing Company X through the lens of systems thinking, this research offers insights into the key ingredients for a successful systemic implementation of servant-leadership over time and how it can, in turn, contribute to corporate sustainability efforts.

### **1.3. Aims, Objectives, and Contributions**

The primary aim of this research is to develop a systemic framework that deepens understanding of the key ingredients required for the long-term, sustainable implementation of servant-leadership in complex organisational contexts. By applying systems thinking as a complementary lens, this study seeks to clarify how SL's behavioural foundations can be transformed into systemic organisational capabilities, particularly in support of corporate sustainability. To achieve this, the study pursues the following four research objectives:

**Objective 1:** To examine the long-term implementation of SL within the exemplary international organisation, identifying key behavioural themes and underlying mechanisms through which SL is enacted and maintained.

**Objective 2:** To assess the company's ST maturity, particularly in relation to how it clarifies and support the sustainable implementation of SL at multi-levels.

**Objective 3:** To develop a practical and transferable framework that integrates systems thinking with SL, focusing on long-term implementation, contextual responsiveness, and sustainability alignment.

**Objective 4:** To evaluate how such a systemic SL framework addresses key SL implementation challenges, such as normative control, scalability, and complexity navigation, in the context of corporate sustainability, thereby offering both theoretical and practical advancement.

In so, this research makes three key theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions, to the fields of leadership studies, systems thinking, and corporate sustainability.

First theoretically, by clarification SL's core processes and behavioural mechanisms. By studying Company X, this research provides detailed accounts of how servant-leadership principles are operationalised in a real-world organisational context as described by participants, addressing the literature's lack of empirical case studies (Liden et al., 2014). The study identifies and conceptualises the underlying systemic and behavioural elements that support the sustainable enactment of SL. By integrating systems thinking as an analytical and developmental lens, the research responds to long-standing critiques of SL's conceptual ambiguity, limited scalability and adaptability, and underdeveloped structural framing (Eva et al., 2019; Liu, 2019), demonstrating how a holistic approach can enhance its long-term

impact. This integration aims at enhancing SL's capacity to operate in complex, global, and dynamic environments. Subsequently, this study proposes Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) as a dual-level framework comprising four interdependent systemic processes (e.g., Adaptive Learning and Integrative Communication), and six systemically evolved dimensions. It reframes traditional SL behaviours (e.g., mentoring, listening, awareness) into systemic dimensions that are organisationally distributed and operationalised through systemic mechanisms. These processes, when aligned with system-aware behaviours, offer a comprehensive pathway for embedding SL into organisational culture, strategy, and operations, making it both potentially scalable and context-sensitive. By exploring how SSL enables organisations to move beyond normative compliance and towards transformative sustainable practices, the study contributes to ongoing debates in both the SL and CS literatures about how values-based leadership can be developed to manage complexities at scale.

Second, this study addresses a significant methodological gap in SL literature by employing an in-depth, multi-layered qualitative case study approach (Eva et al., 2019). Drawing on diverse data sources, semi-structured interviews, internal reports ESG reports, this research provides rich empirical insight into the dynamic interplay between leadership, systems, and sustainability. Additionally, through its application of systems thinking concepts (e.g., feedback loops, interdependencies, learning loop), the study demonstrates a promising method of mapping leadership as a systemic process rather than a set of individual traits, adding methodological depth and replicability to the emerging field of systems-informed leadership research.

Third, practically, this study aims to offer actionable strategies for leadership development. The SSL framework translates theoretical insights into practical guidance tools for organisations seeking to embed SL into processes such as training, communication, reviews, and evaluation in ways that are locally adaptive and globally coherent. Moreover, the research aims at providing a replicable framework for implementing SL in complex environments such as global manufacturing, where challenges of regional diversity, power imbalance, and strategic responsiveness often limit values-based leadership (Eva et al., 2021). By identifying the conditions under which SL thrives or falters, the study offers strategies for overcoming typical implementation barriers, such as shallow feedback, normative conformity and top-down communication.

This research does not particularly aim to promote servant-leadership as a universal solution; rather, it seeks to explore the potential of SL when implemented through systems-oriented processes. Ultimately, the findings essentially aim to contribute to the broader understanding of leadership practices that balance systemic efficiency with people-centred values, offering a practical framework for organisations seeking to thrive in today's dynamic and sustainability-oriented environments. In focusing on the key ingredients for long-term implementation, this study aims to offer a holistic understanding of how SL can be sustained and scaled in large organisations over the long run. As such, it significantly contributes to knowledge by enhancing understanding into the applicability and adaptability of SL by bridging the gap between theory and practice.

## 1.4. Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** reviews the literature on servant-leadership, systems thinking, and corporate sustainability, identifying key theoretical debates and knowledge gaps.
- **Chapter 3** outlines the methodology and research design, including justification for the case study approach and data collection methods.
- **Chapter 4** presents part 1 of the findings of the empirical study, organised by thematic patterns of the accounted behaviour that emerged from interviews and company documents.
- **Chapter 5** presents par 2 of the findings of the empirical study, offering a theoretical elaboration of the systemic processes emerging from the participants accounts.
- **Chapter 6** presents a critical discussion of the findings, exploring how SSL addresses known limitations of servant-leadership and contributes to organisational systems transformation. It then theorises the Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) framework, integrating empirical themes into a systems-informed framework.
- **Chapter 7** concludes with theoretical and practical contributions, limitations, practical recommendations and directions for future research.

# Chapter 2- Conceptual Background and Approach

## 2. Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations central to integrating servant-leadership (SL) with systems thinking (ST) as a means to enhance the SL's applicability and to advance sustainable practices in complex settings. Businesses today operate in environments characterised by complexity, interconnected systems, and global challenges that demand adaptive, ethical, and inclusive leadership. The integration of SL and ST aims to foster a deeper understanding of their individual constructs, explore their synergies, and address current research gaps. In doing so, it seeks to elucidate how systems thinking provides opportunities to address the critiques and challenges associated with SL while creating a pathway to corporate sustainability (CS).

The literature review process aimed to capture the breadth and depth of current debates on SL, ST, and CS. The NTU open reach library, along with leading academic databases such as ProQuest, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, were used to identify seminal works, foundational theories, and contemporary critiques. Selection criteria prioritised peer-reviewed articles and high-impact journals, emphasising works published by Greenleaf and other scholars within the last two decades. This timeframe marks the start of when research on SL picked up, reflecting both the evolution and contemporary critiques of SL from diverse sources, including empirical and theoretical research, to establish a comprehensive conceptual foundation.

The initial search focused on keywords such as ‘leadership’, ‘servant-leadership’, ‘servant-leadership critiques’ and ‘corporate sustainability’. The extensive review revealed, a strong connection between SL and ST through their holistic natures, which will be further explained. This distinctive feature of SL has been largely ignored by follow-up works since its introduction in the 1970s by Greenleaf, with most research focusing on its people-centred characteristics. Addressing today’s global challenges requires more than ethical leadership practices; it necessitates a holistic framework that help leaders navigate the complexities of today’s interconnected systems and adapt to constant changes. Such oversight of SL’s original feature, has lent support to various critiques about SL applicability, often viewed as rather idealistic and philosophical. While SL provides the moral and relational foundation for an ethical leadership, its effectiveness could potentially be enhanced through systems thinking-informed processes, as proposed in this study. ST focus on interconnectedness, emergent events, and feedback loops, enabling leaders not only to operationalise SL holistic principles in complex and dynamic environments but also to integrate sustainable practices.

Subsequently, the search expanded to include topics on ‘systems thinking in leadership’ and ‘adaptive leadership’, as the purpose of the literature review evolved, focusing on the intersection between SL and ST. Throughout the literature review process, attention was given to identifying gaps in the existing research, particularly key insights regarding SL and ST, and their collective impact on SL’s implementation and on corporate sustainability. To present a structured synthesis, the literature has been organised under the heading ‘Conceptual Background and Approach’. This approach clarifies the rationale for integrating SL and ST into a unified framework and illustrates how the proposed framework fills critical gaps in the current literature. This integrated framework offers significant contributions to our understanding of SL from a new lens, positioning it as a promising systemic leadership with the potential to contribute to advancing corporate sustainability. When combined, SL

and ST provide a holistic framework for leading with values, systemic insight, and a commitment to shared growth, helping organisations to thrive while creating value for the broader system.

The chapter begins with a general exploration of leadership's evolution toward ethical and relational models, emphasising SL's emergence as a response to the growing demands for inclusive and sustainable leadership (Section 2.1). This includes critical reflections on relational dynamics, the role of followers, and the relevance of systems thinking in enhancing SL's relational constructs and ensuring its sustained implementation.

The discussion progresses into a comprehensive review of servant-leadership in Section 2.2. This section examines the principles of SL, its critiques, and the persistent gaps in its conceptualisation. These limitations stem from a lack of a unified framework, misconceptions about its core philosophy, and deviations from Greenleaf's (1977) original vision of SL, that neglected important features much relevant in navigated interconnected complex contexts, such as community-building (Liden et al., 2014). To address these limitations, this study proposes employing a systems thinking lens to provide a new avenue for enhancing understanding and resolving current challenges. This section also explores SL's primary characteristics, existing measures, the relevance of systems thinking's emphasis on wholeness, and SL's potential as a change-oriented leadership approach.

In Section 2.3, the chapter conceptualises systems thinking, highlighting its relations with complexity and ethics, and introducing its relevance to SL. Section 2.4 follows on by demonstrating the connection between SL and ST, and the synergies that arise from their integration. ST's focus on interconnectedness, feedback loops, and emergent phenomena complements SL's ethical and relational dimensions, offering a promising framework to enhance SL's applicability and scalability in complex organisational systems. The discussion

demonstrates how ST can provide new perspectives on SL's implementation and operationalisation in dynamic contexts.

Section 2.5 delves into exploring the potential of Systems Thinking as a practical lens for servant-leadership implementation. It presents the gaps in viewing SL through a systemic perspective and why SL/ ST integration is worth exploring. The section concludes with an analysis of the importance of ST to SL's development and implementation, highlighting the significance of developing a leadership framework that enables leaders to better manage complex leadership challenges. In so, proposing the Systemic Servant Leadership conceptual framework that balances servant values with systems thinking literacy, which will serve as the theoretical underpinning for this research.

Section 2.6 follows by exploring the SSL practicality for addressing the inherent complexities of corporate sustainability; chosen as a context, as it presents one of the complex challenges of today's interconnected and dynamic systems. Finally, Section 2.7 summarises the gaps and limitations of SL understanding and implementation. It outlines the rationale for examining the potential contributions of integrating ST to deepen conceptual insights into SL and ways to improve its practicality, while encouraging greater commitment to CS. Ultimately leading to the development of the research aims and objectives that guide the subsequent methodology.

## **2.1. Leadership in General**

Leadership has undergone significant transformations over the decades, evolving from traditional, hierarchical models to more inclusive, ethical, and relational approaches in response to globalisation, environmental changes, and societal demands. This evolution reflects a progressive broadening of focus, shifting from individual traits and behaviours to

situational, ethical, and relational dimensions of leadership. This section critically examines fundamental assumptions about leadership, reflecting on the nature of relational approaches, the role of followership, and the integration of systems thinking with servant-leadership principles as a potential approach for managing the complexities of today's era, such as sustainability.

### **2.1.1. The Emergence of Ethical Leadership**

Characterised by globalisation and corporate expansion, the mid-20th era saw increased recognition of ethical leadership, triggered by growing concerns about corporate scandals and unethical behaviour in organisations. The concept of ethics forms the philosophical basis of a code of values principles and the acceptable and unacceptable ways of behaving (Minkes et al., 1999). Leaders who prioritise ethical behaviour and stakeholder engagement achieve greater leadership effectiveness and drive positive business and sustainability outcomes (Waldman and Siegel, 2008). However, while ethical leadership provides a strong moral foundation, it often assumes a top-down approach, where the leader acts as the primary moral agent within the organisation (Yukl, 2013; Kanungo, 2001).

As leadership theory continues to evolve, contemporary scholars suggest that ethical leadership must emerge through a collective process rather than being imposed by individual leaders (Yammarino et al., 2012). Consequently, the focus has shifted from hierarchical models to approaches that foster collaboration, shared values, and trust, viewed as essential elements for addressing the complexities of contemporary organisations (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). However, while ethical leadership is valuable, it can limit the agency and autonomy of followers, neglecting the importance of mutual influence in leadership processes. Consequently, relational leadership emerged, addressing these limitations by

emphasising leadership as a social and co-constructive process, where relationships and interactions between leaders and followers become central (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

### **2.1.2. The Transition to Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership theory, as posited by scholars such as Uhl-Bien (2006), emphasises the importance of high-quality connections between leaders and followers. This approach aligns with the evolving demands of organisational challenges, which require collaboration and collective problem-solving (Carson et al., 2007). By involving followers in the decision-making process, relational leaders foster a sense of ownership, accountability and commitment (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), enhancing organisational effectiveness. Relational leadership is not simply about describing improved interpersonal skills or better communication, but about recognising leadership as co-created through ongoing interactions between all organisational members. It shifts the focus from top-down, individual-driven approach to partnership, emphasising mutual influence and distributed responsibility (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This perspective challenges traditional understanding of organisational dynamics, suggesting that followers play an equally important role as leaders in leadership and influence process (Yukl, 2013). This rise questions in leadership studies as to what extend should followers rather than leaders be the unit of analysis?

Traditional leadership research has predominantly focused on leaders as the primary unit of analysis, potentially overlooking important aspects of leadership dynamics. However, recent research suggests that examining leadership through the lens of followers might provide richer insights into organisational processes and outcomes. Yammarino et al., 2012 argue that follower perceptions and responses significantly influence leadership effectiveness. Similarly, Muterera et al. (2015) reveal how follower expectations and cultural backgrounds significantly impact how leadership is enacted and experienced within organisations. These

research suggest that followers actively construct and influence leadership processes through their perceptions, interpretations and initiatives, and so their perspectives and experiences are crucial for understanding leadership effectiveness.

However, focusing primarily on followers would simply reverse the existing bias rather than address the fundamental limitation of single-unit analysis. While there is merit in paying greater attention to followers, it should not be about simply shifting focus from one group to another, but rather about understanding how leadership is co-constructed through mutual influence processes. A more balanced view should examine both leaders and followers' perspectives to gain deeper understanding of the relationships and dynamics through which leadership emerges. This approach can help to better capture the complexity of modern organisations which is increasingly calling for relational, distributed and collaborative leaderships.

As organisations are increasingly facing volatile environments, relational leadership narrow focus proved insufficient for addressing complex organisational challenges. Relational leadership, while valuable in exploring the social processes of leadership often lacks “the grounding in moral and ethical principles and developmental aspects necessary to guide leadership behaviours in complex and diverse contexts”(Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012, p. 10). Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2020), point to this, arguing that “relational leadership theory, while effective in fostering engagement, struggles to account for emergent and unpredictable challenges that require decisiveness and adaptability” (p. 112). In today's rapidly changing world, organisations must respond quickly to new challenges and adapt to different contexts (Kellerman, 2014). As a result of this evolving demands, scholars and practitioners alike are shifting focus into leadership that can navigate uncertainties of today's business world, while maintaining ethical integrity.

### **2.1.3. The Shift towards leadership for complexities and Systems Cognisance**

The key catalysts for this shift towards leadership that can manage complex ethical dilemma, reflect the 2008 financial crisis, which revealed the inadequacy of relationship-focused leadership in addressing systemic organisational failures. Ferdig (2007) calls for a leadership framework “grounded in a personal ethic that reaches beyond self-interest (p.1), which views the role of a leader to be a leader ‘with’ others instead of a leader ‘of’ or ‘over’ others and who cannot effectively operate outside of the holistic interconnections that exist among and between people and systems” (p.27). This is corroborated by Ayoubi et al’s (2015) argument that a suitable adaptive leadership style grounded in ethical values is needed to deal with today’s complexities, which should perform as an evolutionary or a serving style to empower followers and motivate them in learning and in using their autonomy.

Subsequently, recent years have seen renewed interest in servant-leadership (SL) principles, with scholars such as Waldman, 2014 and Eva et al. (2019) describing it as the answer to today’s era. Greenleaf’s (1977) servant-leadership is a values-based approach that seeks to serve others first, putting others’ needs and well-being as central practice. Its relevance has grown as organisations face increasing pressures to adopt ethical, sustainable, people-centred approaches to leadership. Wong et al. (2023) assert that in today’s complex climate, servant-leadership represents “the highest ideal for moral and selfless leadership for the greater good” (p 998).

The evolution toward servant-leadership represents more than a theoretical shift; global complexity of today’s business settings has also emerged as a particularly significant driver. It represents increasing needs for frameworks that better address interconnected and dynamic challenges, in response to the increasing complexity of organisational environments. As

pointed by Kansil and Sujuti (2024), the convergence of global challenges, technological disruption, and ethical demands makes servant-leadership particularly relevant to contemporary organisations. This reconsideration reflects growing recognition of SL's adaptability while maintaining core ethical principles. SL's strengths in fostering trust and relational engagement make it well-suited to addressing ethical and interpersonal challenges, as it builds resilience and adaptability in teams (Canavesi and Minelli, 2021).

Central to SL approach is its holistic view of relationships and building close communities (Liden et al., 2008), broadening the unit of analysis to followers inside and outside the organisation. This is reflected in the way leaders act with "morality, showing great concern for the company's stakeholders and engaging followers in multiple dimensions, such as emotional, relational and ethical, to bring out their full potential and empower them to grow into what they are capable of becoming" (Canavesi and Minelli, 2021, p.414). This central focus uniquely positions it as a viable approach to address critical gaps in other leadership approaches (Hoch et al., 2018; Waldman, 2014). As Sipe and Frick (2009) note, SL principles "foster a sense of community and shared purpose that transcends traditional leadership models" (p. 3). Most leadership tend to "undervalue the developmental needs of leaders and their teams", capabilities much required for addressing broader organisational and societal complexities (Drath et al., 2008, p. 635; Eva et al., 2021; Uhl-Bien, 2006). For instance, transformational leadership motivates followers to achieve extraordinary goals through vision-driven change but often prioritises organisational outcomes over ethical considerations or follower well-being (Stone et al., 2004; Bass, 1990). Similarly, distributed leadership fosters collaboration by diffusing leadership responsibilities across teams yet often lacks the strong ethical grounding necessary to align collective efforts with long-term sustainability goals (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002). Whereas relational theory stresses shared influence, it does not necessarily prioritise the well-being or growth of followers as a central

outcome of success as with servant-leadership, nor does it guide leaders through complexities (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Furthermore, the broader context within which leaderships operate is often, undervalued in most models, leading to a narrow focus that overlooks systemic challenges and global interconnectedness (Blustein, 2011; Senge, 2006). Servant-leadership on the other hand, goes further by viewing follower development as a key measure of leadership success, that prioritises others' needs, stretching beyond the organisation, while considering its long-term broader impacts (Eva et al., 2019; Sipe and Frick, 2009). This perspective redefines leadership success in terms of follower development and well-being, which has the potential to offer a more inclusive and sustainable framework for leadership (Liden et al., 2008; Van Dierendonck, 2011). SL's holistic nature, integrates individual growth with collective well-being, creating networks of trust and collaboration, essential for navigating interconnected systems (Sendjaya et al., 2018; Sipe and Frick, 2009). These attributes distinguish it as a unique framework where the connection and relations between various stakeholders are grounded in its 'motivation to serve', elucidating its relevance within complex global leadership (Flick and Sipe, 2015). Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) identify this as a critical area for advancement, arguing that leadership effectiveness depends on creating environments that encourage interaction, innovation, and emergence, rather than providing direct answers or overly structured guidance. This approach emphasises enabling bottom-up dynamics and collective intelligence to achieve organisational growth in complex environments. For instance, Kansil and Sujuti (2024), highlight the need for SL to meet the challenges of leading in increasingly digital environments while maintaining human-centred approaches. Servant-leadership's inherited emphasis on individual development and holistic effectiveness proves particularly relevant in this context.

However, despite its various distinguishing attributes, SL faces many critics due to its perceived idealism and divergence from dominant performances-driven models (Eva et al., 2019), limiting its acceptance. SL's idealism and focus on others' needs can clash with the demands of high-pressure environments (Eva et al., 2019), impacting its implementation, yet Wong et al.(2023) amongst others stress that even though SL is difficult to implement, “society is still better served when we aim at this ideal for leadership and good work” (p 998). In line with the various scholars' recognition of the value of servant-leadership in today's era, this research aims at exploring and addressing the tension barriers inhibiting its sustainable implementation. This aim is further driven by the gap in SL literature relating to the lack of clear implementation frameworks, and its difficulties in scaling larger organisations, resulting in SL being often viewed as difficult to implement, especially in large, dynamic organisations (Eva et al., 2019).

These limitations highlight the need for a complementary framework that enables SL to evolve beyond interpersonal dynamics to address broader complex organisational challenges. Van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) observe that the tendency to view servant-leadership primarily through individual virtues lenses rather than organisational processes has limited its acceptance as a comprehensive leadership model. However, Liu (2019) highlight the importance of retaining SL's moral foundation while scaling its applicability. This balance represents perhaps the most critical challenge for SL implementation, requiring a more strategic and practical framework to better clarify and operationalise its processes, aligning them with the new shift towards acknowledging the broader interconnected systems. Accordingly, this research proposes reframing servant-leadership through systems thinking, a lens that helps view SL's often-overlooked holistic nature and attributes from a different perspective than individual virtues lenses.

This proposal reflects the growing awareness that today's world is shaped by complex, interconnected systems and the corresponding need for a holistic leadership approaches rooted in relational ethics, shared responsibility, and long-term stewardship- core values of servant-leadership that prioritise sustainable service to society (Wong et al., 2023; Canavesi and Minelli, 2021; Liden et al., 2008; Laub 1999). There is a clear shift in literature toward a new way of thinking, grounded in ethics, that sees organisations not as isolated parts, but as dynamic systems that are connected to wider social, environmental, and economic networks. Millar et al. (2013) stresses that this evolving landscape requires visionary, morally driven leaders who can navigate complex systems, use awareness, and adapt quicker to change, where relational and other theories may falter. Similarly, scholars like Dreier et al. (2019) stress the need for a new “holistic, synergistic and people-centred approaches that engages all stakeholders” (p 8). These arguments not only highlight the necessity of a holistic, systems thinking style in navigating complex systems, but also the imperative of combining morality with a broader scope of relations inside and outside the organisation.

As complexity intensifies across economic, social, and environmental domains, systems thinking is increasingly advocated as a vital lens for understanding interdependencies, anticipating unintended consequences, and enabling adaptive, whole-systems responses to long-term complex challenges (Lozano, 2018; Starik and Kanashiro, 2013; Meadow 2008, Senge , 2006). Systems thinking is a holistic approach that examines the dynamic relationships and interactions within a system to understand how its components influence one another, enabling leaders to address complex challenges and design effective interventions (Meadows, 2008; Arnold and Wade, 2015). While both SL and ST align in their holistic approaches, ST's strength lies in viewing organisations as interconnected wholes, helping leaders to focus on understanding the big picture, identifying patterns, and long-term impacts to drive sustainable and adaptive solutions across different contexts (Senge, 1990).

Although SL exemplifies the much-needed balance between followers' development and the ethical achievement of shared goals, examining it through a systems thinking lens would assist to uncover and enhance its capacity to address systemic challenges and complexities in practice. This systems-oriented perspective may prove valuable in enabling SL to operationalise its serving principles within organisational processes, aligning values with systemic practices (Senge, 1990).

This research background and rationale prompted this study's aim to explore the integration of SL and ST in greater depth and in practice, through a case study of an international servant-led company, to gain a deeper understanding of how these frameworks interact to enhance SL's implementation. By examining real-world applications, this research seeks to provide actionable insights into how servant-led organisations can leverage ST to navigate interconnected systems while maintaining their commitment to service and ethics. For instance, using ST lens could reveal how servant-leadership's emphasis on relational trust and empowerment contributes to complex issues such as sustainability. Accordingly, the integration of SL and ST, provides the theoretical underpinning that guide this study and the research methodology. In so, assisting to potentially develop a practical systemic servant-leadership framework that leverages the strengths of both approaches.

The next parts of this chapter delve deeper into the literature on SL and ST, drawing insights from current critics and debates and exploring corporate sustainability as an ideal context to theoretically present the potential of such integration.

## 2.2. Servant-Leadership (SL)

The emergence of servant-leadership (SL) represents a convergence of ethical and relational leadership approaches. SL is a philosophy that links leadership to service, ethics, values, and morality (Liu, 2019). It has increasingly attracted great interest as a desirable approach to leadership within contemporary society, due to its unique focus rooted in the principle of prioritizing the needs of others (Waldman, 2014). Although it emerged in the 70s, related research only peaked in the last 20 years, therefore much understanding about the concept is still needed (Parris and Welty-Peachey, 2013). This section aimed to build deeper insights into SL from its origins to present-time, by critically analysing the construct, its limitations, and the related gaps in research.

### 2.2.1. Origins of SL

SL theory emerged in the 70s, following the work of Robert Greenleaf, founder of the modern servant-leadership movement. In his well-acclaimed seminal essay “The Servant as Leader” he promoted a hopeful vision of a better society through service. Greenleaf (1977) stated that:

*“The servant-leader is servant first rather than a leader first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first, then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from the one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. ... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant, first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more*

*likely themselves to become servants? .... And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed?"* (p.27).

These lines are the closest to a definition provided by Greenleaf (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

This quote focuses on the unique core features of servant-leaders that distinguish them from other leaders - the priority of the leader to serve first before consciously aspiring to lead.

Greenleaf (1977) explains that the difference arises from the *'care taken by the servant'*, to ensure that others' highest priority needs are being served first, as opposed to the leader who is power or financially driven. Servant-leaders rather focus on the needs of followers first and their growth to consequently achieve organisational objectives (Hoch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2017). Parris and Welty-Peachey (2013) affirmed SL as a people-centred approach that is mostly characterised by its ethical values. Russell (2001) contends that *"values are the core element of servant-leadership; they are the independent variables that actuate servant-leader behaviour"* (p. 9), and they are manifested in the care given by the leader to put others' needs first.

The other distinguishing feature is that service is not limited to those they lead but extends to the *"least privileged in society"*, and ensuring that they either *'Will benefit, or at least not further be harmed'*. Greenleaf claimed that a good, just and better society depends on leaders who care i.e., *'leaders who extend consideration to all those affected by the organisation'* (SanFacon and Spears, 2008, p.2). In that, SL has inherited core features assimilated with CS regarding serving others' needs inside and outside the organisation, benefiting society and preventing harm. These moral and others-serving qualities have been identified as the essence of servant-leadership positioning it as a unique leadership encompassing a strong focus on both ethics and social responsibility (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Being a servant-leader means going beyond one's self-interest, they are governed by something more important: serving humanity (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Greenleaf (1977) emphasised the need to build

communities both inside and outside the organisation where people can grow taller (Spears, 2010).

Another prominent feature in the definition is a commitment to developing more servants as future leaders. The focus on the health, autonomy and growth of followers emerges as a way of developing people capable of building a better tomorrow (SanFacon and Spears, 2008). This focus emanated from servant-leadership's holistic approach (Greenleaf, 1977), that *“engages followers in multiple dimensions (e.g., relational, ethical, emotional, spiritual), such that they are empowered to grow into what they are capable of becoming”* (Eva et al., 2019, p.111). Unfortunately, this feature has not gained enough attention in most studies, despite being a distinguishing core component of SL (Sendjaya et al., 2018); further discussions in section (2.4).

Servant-leadership is still developing as a theoretical concept and suffers from a lack of a precise conceptual definition (Van Diendonck, 2011; Parris and Welty-Peachey, 2013). The literature on servant-leadership remains *“indeterminate, somewhat ambiguous, and mostly anecdotal”* (Russell and Stone, 2002, p. 145). This led to some limitations in knowledge regarding the essence of its construct, as well as many subsequent studies seeking to conceptualise and measure SL (Song, 2018; Van Dierendonck, 2011), incurring more ambiguity. Eva et al (2019) concurred that this is because *“an overwhelming majority of servant-leadership studies provide loose descriptions of what, why, and how servant leaders behave towards their followers as they do”* (p. 114). As a result, there is additionally a limited understanding of the underlying processes of SL influence on followers (Liden et al., 2008), which unfortunately has limited research that could assess its practical utility (McClellan, 2009). This has contributed to the criticisms and scepticism surrounding SL applicability in real-business settings. Furthermore, the original work of Greenleaf (1977) has been found gradually being diluted by the diverse works (Hewitt and La Grange, 2017),

which could lead to a divergence from the original construct and /or an oversight of some of its core elements, such as its holistic (Sendjaya et al., 2018) and community-building characteristics (Liden et al., 2015). This research aims to contribute towards these gaps by specifically focusing on these behaviours relative to systems thinking where applicable (in 2.4.5). These important issues regarding the different conceptualisations, various measurement tools, holistic nature, and the resulting criticisms and paradoxes, will each be discussed in the following sections.

### **2.2.2. Conceptualisations and measurements of SL**

A recent systematic review of the past 20 years of SL literature by Eva et al. (2019) revealed over 68 conceptual and over 205 empirical papers that attempted to conceptualise and measure SL, resulting in a wide range of behavioural characteristics. The heavy focus on conceptualisation has unfortunately further *“limited the amount of research that has been conducted to assess the utility of servant-leadership”* (McClellan, 2009, p.180). Thus, to date Yet, there is currently still no agreed upon conceptualisation nor *“an agreed upon measurement instrument of the theoretical construct”* (Parris and Peachey, 2013, p. 389; Eva et al., 2019; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) argued that the work on SL has not evolved since most papers have *“standalone qualities resulting in more differentiation than integration in the literature”* (p. 304). Furthermore, most research has mainly tried to isolate, define and measure these qualities (Van Dierendonck, 2011), resulting in substantial and diverse sets. In fact, due to this lack of agreement in many studies, the definitions *“were stretched to fit each author’s argument”* (Eva et al, 2019, p.114), resulting in more disparity. Additionally, as these studies have sometimes used different vocabulary for similar concepts (Russel, 2002), they are not offering new insight, rather adding to the conceptual diversity. However, the SL literature still accounts for many influential models

that have contributed to its development, as summarised in Table.1, offering valuable insights and also highlight where insight is lacking.

Spears (2010) presented the most influential ten essential characteristics salient to the understanding of SL: Listening, Empathy, Healing, Conceptualisation, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to the growth of people and Building Community (p.2). However, Spears's model does not differentiate between the intrapersonal aspects, interpersonal aspects, and outcomes (Van Dierendonck, 2011), making it "*not sufficiently precise for empirical study*" (Reinke, 2004, p.41). Spears (2010), himself declared that these ten characteristics are by no means exhaustive, however they serve to communicate the power and promise SL has to offer. Thus, although the characteristics are well understood and distinct from other approaches, they have never been empirically tested (Van Dierendonck, 2011) but have created a foundation for many subsequent conceptual models and measures (Eva et al., 2019). Since Spears's 10 characteristics are the most influential set, derived from Greenleaf original work, they provided valuable insights for the current research.

Building on Spears' characteristics, Laub (1999) was one of the first researchers to attempt to empirically conceptualise servant-leadership by providing one of the earliest definitions as "*an understanding and practice that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader*" (p. 81). Like spears, Laub emphasised the importance of developing others and building a community. The difference between both models lies in the focus, Spears's focus was more on the character of the servant-leader, while Laub's (1999) model focuses primarily on the behaviours of leaders (Matteson and Irving, 2016). Although Laub's model also offers a measurement tool, however, due to high correlations found between the SL characteristics, its operationalisation was questioned as valid (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

**Table 1. Overview of Existing Conceptualisations of Servant-Leadership**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Conceptual Only</b>	<b>Conceptual &amp; Measure</b>
Spears (1998, 2010)	Listening, Empathy, Healing, Conceptualisation, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to the growth of people, Building community.	X	
Laub (1999)	Values people, Develops people, Builds community, Displays authenticity, Provides leadership, Shares leadership.	X	
Russel and Stone (2002)	Functional Characteristics: Vision, Honesty, Integrity, Trust, Service, Modelling, Pioneering, Appreciation of others, Empowerment.  Complementary Characteristics: Communication, Credibility, Competence, Stewardship, Visibility, Influence, Persuasion, Listening, Encouragement, Teaching, Delegation.	X	
Patterson (2003)	Agapao love, Humility, Altruism, Vision, Trust, Empowerment, Service.	X	
Dennis and Bocarnea (2005)	Empowerment, Love, Humility, Trust, Vision.		X
Barbuto and Wheeler (2006)	Altruistic calling, Emotional healing, Wisdom, Persuasive mapping, Organizational stewardship.		X
Hale and Fields (2007)	Service, Humility, Vision.	X	
Keith (2008)	Self-Awareness, Listening, Changing the Pyramid, Developing colleagues, Coaching not controlling, Unleashing the intelligence of others, Foresight.	X	
Liden et al. (2008, 2015)	Conceptual skills, Empowerment, Helping subordinates grow and succeed, Putting subordinates first, Behaving ethically, Emotional healing, Creating value for the community.		X
Sipe and Frick (2009, 2015)	Persons of Character, Putting People First, Skilled Communicators, Compassionate Collaborators, Foresight, Systems-Thinkers, Moral Authority		X
Van Dierendonck et al. (2017); Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011)	Empowerment, Accountability, Standing back, Humility, Authenticity, Courage, Interpersonal acceptance, Stewardship.		X
Sendjaya et al. (2018, 2008)	Voluntary subordination, Authentic self, Covenantal relationship, Responsible morality, Transcendental spirituality, Transforming influence.		X

*Source: researcher's summary of the prominent conceptualisations in SL literature*

As more studies followed, more variations in characteristics emerged, which suggest that research is not building on/from each-other (Focht and Ponton, 2015). The models that followed have provided an insightful contribution to the understanding of the SL construct as

a people-centred approach that puts the needs of others first through its distinguished essence of service. However, the sheer number of characteristics provided, lend more broadness to SL conceptualisation than clarity. Furthermore, Russell and Stone (2002) revealed that some of these characteristics include Greenleaf's original attributes, while the rest are incorporated under broader categories, like conceptualisation and foresight fall under vision. This suggests that efforts to be more precise in understanding SL has led to a divergence from its origin principles (Hewitt and La Grange, 2017). For instance, the characteristic of building community, which is an important part of SL, was highlighted in the early conceptualisations of Spears and Laub and then neglected until Liden et al's. (2008) work. Servant-leadership suggests that a true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other outside institutions (Spears, 2010). The importance of community to SL has been prevalent since its original construct, it has also been mentioned as a way for companies to engage in CS-related activities (Liden et al., 2014), by giving back to the community. Yet, large knowledge gaps remain, especially regarding the underlying processes that promote community building (Liden et al., 2014, 2008; Reinke, 2004). Similarly, none of the above conceptual models alluded to the holistic nature of SL and its focus on the 'whole'. SL puts strong emphasis on a holistic approach to work from vision, relations and behaviour to decision-making (Tumolo, 2020), and yet this feature has been somehow neglected in most research so far. Only two recent models by Sendjaya et al., (2018) and Sipe and Frick (2015, 2009), have uniquely emphasised the holistic and systemic nature of SL. Since this research aims to explore SL's potential to manage modern era complexities the like of sustainability issues, through systems thinking perspective, recognising that the uniqueness of SL includes building community and holistic/systems thinking characteristics, amongst other Greenleaf origin ideas, makes these three models [Liden et al's. (2008), Sendjaya et al., (2018) and Sipe and Frick (2015, 2009)] highly relevant to this research.

The SL-28 instrument produced by Liden et al. (2008, 2015), through explanatory factor analysis, consists of 7 characteristics: conceptual skills, empowerment, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, behaving ethically, emotional healing, and creating value for the community. The model represents a significant contribution to the attempt of understanding SL and one of the most valid measures (Eva et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2014). The model was later shortened to the SL-7 in 2015 for ease of use within a global SL variable (Eva et al., 2019). Its unique contribution is the inclusion of the dimension of ‘building community’ and of ‘conceptual skills’ which adds a competence-based characteristic in addition to the behavioural ones (Eva et al., 2019). Another primary contribution of Liden et al. (2015, 2008) is that they offer the first empirically validated results distinguishing SL from other leaderships. Their findings demonstrated that servant-leadership predicted an additional 19% variance in community citizenship behaviours, 5% in-role performance, and 4% variance in organisational commitment over transformational leadership and LMX. This further supports the importance of building close-knit relationships and communities both internally and externally to SL. This feature is particularly relevant in the context of complex, dynamic interconnected systems, where the interdependence between employees, stakeholders and the broader community can drive innovation, engagement, and adaptability (Senge, 2006). Especially more so, when combined with a holistic approach in doing so, as exemplified by SL (Greenleaf, 1977). This distinguishing nature of SL was largely overlooked until the work of Sendjaya et al. (2008), which contributed to reigniting the original ideas of Greenleaf by focusing on its holistic nature.

Sendjaya et al's (SLBS-35) measure, consists of 35-items Scale and 6 characteristics - Voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality and transforming influence. A shorter valid version of their initial model (SLBS-6) was developed in 2018, and like the SL-7, provides a straightforward and

easy administration (Sendjaya and Cooper, 2011). It has uniquely added the ‘spirituality’ dimension which “*captures and faithfully reflects Greenleaf’s initial intent to promote a holistic approach of servant-leadership that distinguishes it from other positive leadership paradigms*” (Sendjaya et al., 2008, p. 943). This is an important finding relative to this research, which flags an alignment between SL and systems thinking, albeit not explicitly.

On the other hand, the model by Sipe and Frick (2009, 2015), has uniquely characterized SL leaders as systems- thinkers. Through their study of 10 organisations practicing servant-leadership, over a 10 years-period they have identified 7 pillars of servant-leadership: Persons of Character, Puts People First, Skilled Communicator, Compassionate Collaborator, Foresight, Systems Thinker, and Moral Authority. Each of the 7 pillars, is said to represent “*a set of concrete, observable competencies that provide structure and support to an organisation’s employees, customers, and wider community*” (Sipe and Frick, 2009, p 3).

Like with Sendjaya et al. (2018), Sipe and Frick also held firmly to Greenleaf’s core ideas (Hewitt and La Grange, 2017), where the influence of Greenleaf’s (1977) original work can be highly sensed through its consistency with Spears’s (2010) ten characteristics (Crippen and Nagel, 2013). Mainly because, in 2004, Frick authored Greenleaf’s comprehensive biography and was therefore given access to all his original writings (Crippen and Nagel, 2013). The framework is illustrated in Table. 2, adapted from Sipe and Frick (2009, pp. 5-6):

**Table 2. The 7 pillars of Servant-Leadership**

Pillars	Competencies
<p><b>1- Persons of Character:</b> Makes insightful, ethical, and principle-centred decisions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintains Integrity</li> <li>- Demonstrates Humility</li> <li>- Serves a Higher Purpose</li> </ul>
<p><b>2- Putting People First:</b> Helps others meet their highest priority development needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Displays a Servant's Heart</li> <li>- Is Mentor-Minded</li> <li>- Shows Care &amp; Concern</li> </ul>
<p><b>3- Skilled Communicators:</b> Listens earnestly and speaks effectively.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Demonstrates Empathy</li> <li>- Invites Feedback</li> <li>- Communicates Persuasively</li> </ul>
<p><b>4- Compassionate Collaborators:</b> Strengthens relationships, supports diversity, and creates a sense of belonging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expresses Appreciation</li> <li>- Builds Teams &amp; Communities</li> <li>- Negotiates Conflict</li> </ul>
<p><b>5- Has Foresight:</b> Imagines possibilities, anticipates the future, and proceeds with clarity of purpose.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Visionary</li> <li>- Displays Creativity</li> <li>- Takes Courageous &amp; Decisive Action</li> </ul>
<p><b>6- Systems-Thinkers:</b> Thinks and acts strategically, leads change effectively, and balances the whole with the sum of its parts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comfortable with Complexity</li> <li>- Demonstrates Adaptability</li> <li>- Considers the "Greater Good"</li> </ul>
<p><b>7- Leads with Moral Authority:</b> Worthy of respect, inspires trust and confidence, establishes quality standards for performance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accepts &amp; Delegates Responsibility</li> <li>- Shares Power &amp; Control</li> <li>- Creates a Culture of Accountability</li> </ul>

Since this research aims to explore the organisational outcome of CS in relations to SL, which is a ‘community-related outcome’, and from a holistic/ systems thinking lens, Liden et al.’s model has some resonance with this research for its ‘community building’ dimension which reflects the servant-leaders ‘*Conscious and genuine concern towards creating value for the community around the organisation as well as encouraging followers to be active in the community*’ (Eva et al., 2019, p.116). On the other hand, the unique focus of Sendjaya et al.’s measure on the holistic nature of SL, and keeping to Greenleaf’s original ideas, also resonates with this research, through ‘spirituality’. Thus, while each model has a unique

feature relevant to this research, they do not combine both essential elements in one model. However, their findings offer significant support to other scholars' research that distinguished SL from other alternative approaches for CS leadership, and valuable knowledge for the present research into SL core constructs.

Conversely, the Seven Pillars of Servant-Leadership model by Sipe and Frick (2009, 2015), incorporates both notions of building community and systems thinking along other Greenleaf's origin characteristics that are mostly relevant and valuable to this research. As the present study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, by exploring ways to enhance SL's long-term implication. It was said to be developed from "*a desire to be concrete about how to implement Servant-Leadership*" (Sipe and Frick, 2009, xii).

However, while the model offers broader scope into SL's construct, critiques have emerged, particularly regarding difficulty in long-term implementation, managing complexities, and its undermining of systems thinking. Critics argue that while the model emphasises foresight and systems thinking, it does not sufficiently equip leaders to navigate complex, interconnected systems. The model was criticised for presenting servant-leadership as universally applicable, neglecting how cultural and contextual differences influence leadership effectiveness (Malakyan, 2022). As such, it risks oversimplifying the interplay of dynamic, nonlinear relationships in complex systems, leading to implementation challenges. Furthermore, although systems thinking is identified as a pillar the model does not provide actionable strategies for embedding ST's principles into leadership practices. As such, it does not offer deeper understanding on how ST benefits SL's sustained implementation within complex interconnected world.

Therefore, it is essential to evaluate the importance of systems thinking to servant-leadership, and to understand the underlying process that could lead to a sustainable and scalable implementation of SL. But first the research explores how SL respond to change to better understand its adaptability in integrating an ST perspective.

### **2.2.3. SL and change processes**

Change has become the norm for organisations to obtain sustainable and competitive success in the constantly changing business environments (Bansal, 2005). SL has been found to possess the potential to create change not only within the organisation but even beyond. According to Tanno and Banner (2018) “*servant-leaders are the best leaders to create change both individually and organisationally*” (p.7).

#### **- 2.2.3.1. Individually:**

Change as an individual outcome of SL is echoed via the phrase “*the process of change starts in here, in the servant, not out there*” (Rieser, 1995, p. 56). Servant-leaders personally live the change, while guiding followers and modelling the way (Sipe and Frick, 2015). Contrary to other transformational leaderships where change is gained through influencing followers to achieve first organisational goals (Smith et al., 2004), unique to SL, leaders foster change by focusing on followers' growth, an openness to the input of others, and their quest for creative ways of solving problems (Keith, 2008). They show commitment to organisational goals by seeking out potential motives in followers, to satisfy their higher needs and engage the whole person as a follower (Tanno and Banner, 2018). Servant-leaders listen carefully, evaluate consequences, apply SL behaviours to systems analysis, and include followers in decisions (Tumolo, 2020; Tanno and Banner, 2018; Sipe and Frick, 2015). In that, the servant-leader could find ways to align followers' and stakeholders' needs and interests with organisational goals to produce desirable behavioural and system change.

Sipe and Frick (2015) stress that servant-leaders do not coerce followers but rather guide and empower them to explore new possibilities, tolerate mistakes and continually communicate the relationship between changes and the shared vision using persuasive language. Indeed, Greenleaf (1977) stressed that servant-leaders possess *“the virtue of change by convincement rather than coercion”* (p. 30) and use gentle persuasion to win necessary changes *“person by person, inch by inch”* (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 43). In other words, they push followers past the struggle of complacency by developing them and communicating why and how change is beneficial, which according to Northouse (2016) is one of the best ways to manage tensions and resistance to change.

Furthermore, servant-leaders aim to build a safe community-like environment where followers can learn and develop (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Greenleaf (1977) stressed that *“The first order of business is to build a group of people who, under the influence of the institution, grow taller and become healthier, stronger, more autonomous”* (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 53). This, as per Liden et al. (2014) creates a serving culture defined as *“the extent to which all members of the work unit engage in servant-leadership behaviours”*, which was related to community-building (p.1437). Barchiesi and La Bella (2014) argued that establishing and enacting SL values and behaviours creates a mechanism through which the leader’s motivation for serving can be communicated throughout the multi-levels of the organisation. Liden et al. (2008) also stated that servant-leaders influence each individual in their workgroup to be more committed to the organisation, and to serving the community. Thus, it was proposed that SL behaviours could affect organisational-level change, specifically towards CS (Van-Dierendonck, 2011), through leaders' modelled behaviour that influences followers and the culture of organisations to be other-serving oriented (Eva et al., 2019). However, the mechanisms of this change influence in practice are relatively

unexplored (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008). Consequently, many researchers have emphasised the need for future research to focus on the underlying processes of servant-leadership influence on followers' behaviour and organisational outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Chiniara and Bentein, 2016; McClellan, 2009; Liden et al., 2008). Linden et al. (2008) encouraged future research to investigate SL from the perspectives of both leaders and followers, to understand how leaders influence their followers' behaviour, organisational culture, and the larger community, suggesting that leaders may engage in varied SL behaviours across their workgroup, thus, affecting each individual differently. However, as these propositions remained unexplored, this research aims to contribute to such knowledge by investigating this underlying process of influence to better understand the outcomes of practising SL, especially to explore its valuable practical utility in managing complexities and sustainability issues.

#### **2.2.3.2. Organisationally:**

SanFacon and Spears (2008) elaborated that at its core, servant-leadership is *“a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—a way of being—that has great potential for creating positive, non-violent change throughout our society and the world”* (p.4). Smith et al. (2004) distinguished servant-leaders from other leaders as motivated by *“egalitarianism”* and so *“serve an evolutionary development purpose”* (p.84). Similarly, Parolini et al. (2008) argued that servant-leaders are motivated by a sense of mission to grow individuals which *“results in a stable culture that is more passive to the external environment”* and which *“focuses more on evolutionary change efforts”* (p.278). McClellan (2008) further elaborated that, unlike other leaderships, *“SL tends to lead to evolutionary, developmental change, i.e., larger-scale social and cultural transformation rather than to the smaller-scale revolutionary organisational change”* (p292). A change that makes a real difference in the world, and which *“comes from this interior place that real change happens, first in ourselves and then in*

*the social systems in which we participate*” (Keith, 2008, p.5). In that, servant-leaders can effect a systemic change, which Kim (2004) argues requires one to operate at the level of mental modes; these represent leaders’ “*deep belief about how the world works and how things ‘ought’ to be*” (p.212). On that note, Greenleaf promoted a hopeful vision of a better society through servant-leadership “*one more just and more loving with greater opportunities for all*” (SanFacon and Spears, 2008, p.2). He believed that this could be achieved by improving the leadership performance of both leaders and institutions. Thus, it suggests an ability to affect an organisational system change.

Sipe and Frick (2015) assert that servant-leaders to manage change by zooming out to see the wider picture which helps them integrate input from all parties in a system to arrive at holistic solutions. This ability to see the bigger picture allows servant-leaders to “*distinguish patterns instead of conceptualising change as isolated events*” (Senge 1990, p.10). As forward thinkers, servant-leaders can “*think and act strategically and lead change effectively by balancing the whole with the sum of its parts*” (Sipe and Frick, 2015, p.130). This approach link servant-leadership to systems thinking, embodied through its unique notion of the ‘wholeness’ (see sec. 2.4), whereby leaders create long-term change, by focusing on the underlying process as a whole instead of as short-term siloed events (Zohar, 2002). They strive to widen their awareness so that they can make more intense and meaningful contact with their situation and the needs of others, especially those underprivileged (Greenleaf, 2002). In doing so, they can identify where change is most required and are also able to foresee and deal with tensions and uncertainties that may incur from change and adapt accordingly (Spears, 2010; Keith 2008). However, despite its valuable attributes and holistic approach to relations, SL idealistic nature faces several critiques and challenges that undermined its wider acceptance and implementation, exacerbated by the lack of a clear

theoretical conceptualisation and practical framework to scale and sustain its application over time (Eva et., al 2021), which merit careful examination.

## **2.2.4. SL Criticisms and Implementation Challenges**

The focus on the moralistic nature of SL, combined with the notion that financial outcomes are not its prime focus not only distinguished it from other leaderships but have limited its acceptance within both the academic and the practitioner community (Song, 2018). This analysis examines the key debates surrounding servant-leadership, evaluating claims that both support and challenge its implementation.

### **2.2.4.1. Conceptual Foundation and Theoretical Challenges**

The fundamental challenge in servant-leadership lies in its conceptual ambiguity and definitional clarity about what precisely constitutes the concept (Gandolfi and Stone, 2018). Van Dierendonck (2011, p. 1228) identified over 44 overlapping SL characteristics across various studies, highlighting the difficulty in establishing a coherent theoretical framework. However, advocates argue that this apparent weakness actually represents the concept's flexible and comprehensive nature, with consistency in core elements across definitions suggesting an underlying coherence despite surface-level variations (Banks et al., 2018).

Additionally, the name 'servant-leadership' itself with its contradictory terms 'servant' and 'leader' has been criticised for creating confusion and potential resistance (Anderson, 2009). Sendjaya and Cooper (2011) explains that this is partly because it is difficult to project a legitimate perception of a servant who leads. Yet, Greenleaf (1977) did not hesitate to use them because he stressed that the very paradoxes they contain made them "*essential to the theory*" (p. 31). He stressed that the key is in understanding and accepting that SL's premise is in the capacity to balance both paradoxes, which comes from the awareness that SL is not a

matter of simply behaving like a leader, but rather of being a leader with the conscious choice to lead- which may not appeal to the power-driven leaders (Greenleaf, 1970, 1977, 2002).

Subsequently, McClellan (2008) argued that many of these criticisms were based on a limited understanding of Greenleaf's writings, or a limited acceptance of the paradoxes of servant-leadership. Similarly, Murphy (2014) also argued that this scepticism came from those who *"have not thoroughly studied, understood, or otherwise experienced the multiple benefits accruing to leaders and organisations that have adopted servant-leadership as an overarching way of life and as a guiding philosophy"* (p.305). For example, Smith et al (2004) claim that the literature on servant-leadership does not advocate risk-taking and innovation. However, the literature on SL is filled with a recognition that the awareness and conceptual thinking nature of servant-leaders nurtures risk-taking, innovation and creativity (e.g. Russell and Stone, 2002; Spears, 1998; Greenleaf, 1996). More to the point, Greenleaf (1996) stated, *"As I use the word lead it involves creative venture and risk"* (p. 54).

This paradoxical challenge, while notable, can thus be addressed through proper repositioning of SL's true meaning. As Dierendonck (2011) argues, that a more comprehensive understanding of SL requires structural approaches to ensure its relevance. Especially so, since the proliferation of definitions and interpretations made it challenging for researchers and practitioners to develop consistent measurement tools and implementation strategies (Eva et al. (2019).

#### **2.2.4.2. Performance Impact Challenges**

The impact of servant-leadership on organisational performance remains a subject of ongoing debate. Critics point to potentially slower decision-making processes and the resource-intensive nature of servant-leadership approaches (Andersen, 2009). The emphasis on employee development and growth can sometimes conflict with the need for metric-based

outcomes and quick, decisive action in competitive business environments (Anderson and Sun, 2017). Particularly, SL was criticised for compromising organisational performance and profitability (Andersen, 2009); as they not only focus on followers' needs but also on society and various stakeholders' interests. Smith et al. (2012) note the lack of standardised framework and clear performance indicators makes it difficult to validate servant-leadership's impact on organisational outcomes.

However, this argument has been heavily contradicted. For instance, research by Liden et al. (2015) demonstrates that SL actually enhances organisational performance by fostering trust, engagement, and long-term loyalty. Hoch et al. (2018) found positive correlations between servant-leadership and various performance metrics, particularly in areas of employee satisfaction, organisational commitment, and long-term sustainability. Sipe and Frick (2009) demonstrated that organisations led by servant-leaders reported higher employee satisfaction and commitment, which translate into improved operational outcomes over time. Eva et al. (2019) acknowledged the challenges in establishing clear causal relationships between SL behaviours and organisational outcomes, compounded by multiple competing measurement frameworks, difficulty in isolating leadership style effects from other variables and the long-term nature of many servant-leadership benefits, which may not be immediately apparent in traditional performance metrics. By focusing on people first, SL addresses root causes of disengagement and inefficiency, such as low morale or lack of trust, which often hinder productivity in traditional models. Such skills are highly relevant to modern complex organisations if operationalised within practical frameworks.

#### **2.2.4.3. Power Dynamics and hierarchal Structures Challenges**

Another substantial SL critique concerns the potential undermining of necessary hierarchical structures. McCrimmon (2010) argues that servant-leadership can create confusion about who

holds decision-making authority and may lead to delayed decision-making in crisis situations. This tension becomes particularly evident in contexts requiring quick, decisive action. Usman et al. (2023) argue that organisations implementing servant-leadership middle managers often experience increased stress due to unclear authority lines and conflicting expectations. This reflects the challenges of balancing servant and leadership roles, especially in high-pressure situations or competitive environments (Urrila and Eva, 2024). Greenleaf admitted that SL is not an easy way of leading, but rather “*exacting and hard to attain*” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 37), acknowledging the burden between balancing organisational goals and developing people.

Others have argued that SL’s relational ethos can inadvertently reinforce paternalistic tendency or benevolent authoritative figure, particularly during crisis, which can inhibit genuine employee empowerment (Martinez and Leija, 2023; McCrimmon, 2010). On the other hand, some empirical research has demonstrated that servant-leadership can actually enhance legitimacy through service (e.g., Zhang et al., 2021; Kool and van Dierendonck, 2012). Liden et al. (2015) further highlighted how servant-leaders foster autonomy and growth among followers while maintaining strategic direction.

On a more significant note, other scholars argue that organisational hierarchical structures, can foster power abuse when disguised as service-oriented leadership. Scholars like Detje (2017) warn against “power camouflaged as service”, highlighting the need for leaders to critically reflect on their use of power to ensure genuine empowerment rather than exploitation (p.337). For instance, mechanisms such as claiming to serve a transcendent goal, were highlighted as potential organisational shielding tools from criticism and for reinforcing control (Alvesson, 2011). Others point to leaders’ inclination to centralise authority, creating dependency among followers, while masking domination under the metaphor of servanthood (Kessler, 2019; James, 2017). However, these views neglect the role of empowering leadership practices central to SL, emphasising that “The best test of a servant-leader is: do

those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous?" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27). Liden et al.'s. (2008) study, amongst others, demonstrated that SL prioritises followers' development into independent servant leaders themselves, contradicting this potential downside. Greenleaf (1970) explains that servant-leaders achieve authority not by exercising control, but by earning trust through service. Similarly, Spears (2010) emphasised that servant-leaders balance authority and service by embodying humility and ethical responsibility, creating environments where both leaders and followers thrive. The key, however, lies in understanding that service and authority are not mutually exclusive but can reinforce each other when properly aligned (Greenleaf 1977).

Other power dynamics related critics, concern the suggested disproportionate burden female leaders may face due to higher expectations of nurturing behaviour, which can reinforce existing gender stereotypes and create additional barriers for women in leadership positions (Tilghman-Havens, 2018; Koenig et al., 2011; Eagly and Karau, 2002). Conversely, research like, Wang et al., (2014), Walumbwa et al., 2010 and Graham, 1991 highlight that SL's emphasis on communal and relational focus and ethical behaviour can dismantle traditional gendered expectations in leadership. They found that female leaders who adopt servant-leader behaviours were perceived as both competent and supportive, teams may also have greater appreciation for more sensitive and traditionally feminine leader behaviours creating a dual advantage that strengthened their leadership credibility (Lemoine, and Blum. 2019; Liden et al., 2014; Schaubroeck et al., 2011). This aligns with earlier work by Eva et al. (2019), who emphasised SL's capacity to reduce bias by prioritising leader-follower relationships over stereotypes.

Other critics argue that servant-leadership might result in follower strain, because those led may have different leadership preferences from what is set by SL, and very different views on how their or others' needs should be satisfied (Panaccio et al., 2015). Indeed, empirical

evidence such as Meuser et al.'s (2011) shows that when there is a mismatch between SL behaviours and followers' leadership preferences, it results in negative organisational performance. Although this can apply to other leaderships, acknowledging these issues is necessary to enhance SL applicability by recognising the contexts in which SL is weak and therefore finding alternative solutions.

#### **2.2.4.4. Contextual and complexity Challenges**

SL challenges are claimed to be more apparent when examining implementation attempts in diverse workforce organisational contexts (Liden et al., 2008). Critics point out that servant-leadership requires significant time investment for relationship building and individual attention to followers and that in fast-paced business environments, this time-intensive approach may not be practical (Ragnarsson, 2018; Wong and Davey, 2007). However, this critique overlooks the long-term benefits of enhanced employee engagement and reduced turnover that often justify the initial time investment, as empirically demonstrated by various research of the long-term positive impact of SL on followers' performance (Hoch et al. 2018), team performance (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016), and organisational performance (Liden et al., 2014).

Additionally, large organisations, particularly in manufacturing or global operations, face significant difficulty translating SL's values into practices without clearer structural or contextual alignment (Rodríguez-Carvajal et al, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021; Liu, 2019). Its prescriptive nature was highlighted as often lacking the adaptability required for diverse organisational settings (Patterson, 2003). This can undermine its capacity to respond to dynamic local demands and operational complexities and to adapt across regions, functions, and stakeholder systems (Sun et al., 2024). In such global and complex contexts, the static

and temporal nature of SL may limit its ability to adapt and act quick, making it difficult to uphold in competitive business environment.

These contextual challenges raise questions about the universal applicability of servant-leadership principles. These critiques highlight how SL can fail when implemented in contexts where systemic biases affect how leadership is perceived (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012; House et al., 2004). For instance, critics believe that servant-leadership represents a predominantly American, Christian-influenced idealistic leadership that may be inappropriately imposed on other contexts (Malakyan, 2023).

Furthermore, this idealistic framing resulted in SL often being interpreted as a philosophy more suited for small, close-knit groups rather than large, hierarchical organisations. While Servant-leadership is praised for its ethical foundation, its lack of clear frameworks for implementation has led to perceptions of it being impractical for large-scale, competitive environments (Eva et al., 2019; Peterson et al, 2012). Research argue that argue that large organizations may struggle with SL's demands for deep relationship building and individualised attention (Zhang et al., 2023). Manufacturing organisations present unique challenges for SL implementation due to their hierarchical structures, productivity pressures, and diverse workforce (Giret et al., 2015). These creates fundamental implementation barriers, resulting from SL approaches that often fail to address the unique demands of manufacturing environments, particularly regarding decision speed and chain of command requirements (McCann and Holt, 2010). This sustainable implementation challenge represents perhaps the most significant critique of servant-leadership in practice, echoing Dierendonck's (2011) assertion that without a clear framework, organisations may struggle to apply SL consistently. This highlights the need for new frameworks that enhance understanding of SL development and processes, highlighting SL's unique features and outcomes (Eva et al., 2019).

ST provides such a complementing tool for understanding the complex interconnections between leadership behaviours and organisational outcomes (Gibbons, 2020), helping leaders navigate the apparent contradictions between service and leadership. The integration of systems thinking offers a more nuanced approach to implementation, by mapping SL's limitations in particular context that require appropriate modifications, supporting continuous learning and flexibility. For instance, critiques on authority, do not necessarily negate SL's value but rather highlight areas requiring careful adaptation. Various examples of successful servant-led organisations maintaining clear authority while prioritising follower development (including those recognised by Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For, like: General Motors, Southwest Airlines, Marriott International and Starbucks), suggest that the apparent contradiction between serving and leading can be resolved through strategic application. This aligns with Sipe and Frick's (2015) 10-years period study, showing that servant-led organisations out-performed Collins' (2001) good to great companies by a significant margin.

While SL faces significant challenges, its value cannot be overlooked and merit a better repositioning. Acknowledging this study's limitations in addressing all the critiques, the aim is to address most relevant challenges that directly impact servant-leadership's sustained implementation in complex, dynamic organisations. These are mostly manifested in critical areas such as scalability, adaptability, and perceived idealism which highlight the need for a fundamental systemic change to strengthen and better scale SL's principles across diverse contexts. Therefore, the aim is to explore the utility of integrating systems thinking with SL to address some of the critical implementation and modern leadership challenges. But first a deeper insight into systems thinking concept.

### **2.3. Systems Thinking (ST)**

Systems thinking approach was first introduced in the 90s in a study by Gladwin et al. (1995) supported later on by Starik and Rands (1995) where both research drew attention to the importance of reintegrating organisations within the social and environmental systems in which they are embedded (Nunhes et al., 2020). These studies have attracted greater attention to the potential use of the systems thinking theory in leadership and stimulated others to focus on such perspective (e.g., Kantabutra and Ketprapakorn, 2020; Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Valente, 2012; Lozano, 2008). Systems thinking is ‘an approach to reasoning and treatment of real-world problems based on the fundamental notion of ‘system’ (Amissah et al., 2020, p.1). Meadows (2008) defines a system as an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organised in a way that achieves outcomes. Thus, systems thinking refers to a perspective aimed at understanding relationships between elements and their overall impact on system outcomes (intended and unintended), and how a system of interest similarly fits in the wider system as a whole (Amissah et al., 2020, p.1). Barry Richmond, who coined the systems thinking term in 1987, referred to ST as seeing the ‘whole’ picture, focusing not only on the trees but also on the forest; one eye on each (Richmond, 1994). Such approach aims at seeing a wider perspective and the details simultaneously (Willamo et al., 2018). A similar notion was given by Heifetz and Linsky (2017), who called on leaders to ‘get on the balcony’, to get a ‘whole’ view, and described ST as a holistic approach that focuses on how the parts function together in networks of interaction (p.51). In a same vein, Gharajedaghi (2011) argues that ST is about understanding how parts interconnect together rather than breaking down systems into parts to understand them separately. This is because the defining characteristics of the ‘whole’ system cannot be found in its parts when they are isolated, as they lose at least some of their meanings (Plate and Monroe, 2014). Thus, according to Boardman and Sauser (2008), to improve the ‘whole’, systems thinkers thrive to optimise and

manage the interactions among the parts, which may result in improved performance, reduced conflicts, expanded delegation of responsibility and overcoming resistance to change. Senge (2006) concludes that, systems thinking is simply a discipline for seeing wholes, seeing interrelationships and patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots'"(p. 68). However, while ST approach shows significant qualities, it has its limitations as a stand-alone and is most effective when used as complementary to an ethics-based and approach to mitigate its shortcomings, where SL's people-centred attributes are needed to anchor in ethics, as discussed further.

### **2.3.1. ST and Complexity**

While acknowledging that strains of systems thinking prevail in diverse scientific fields such as natural science, information technology, ecology...etc. (Williams et al., 2017), this research focuses solely on integrating systems theory from a management field and within the boundaries of the three CS dimensions/ systems covering stakeholders that touch or are touched by business operations, such as employees, communities, regulations, broader global societies...etc.

The connection between ST and complexities is well described by Capra (1996), stating that “the more we study the major problems of our time, the more we come to realise that they cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means that they are interconnected and interdependent” (p.3). Systems thinking recognises that organisations are not isolated entities. They are living systems, shaped by the interactions of their parts and their relationships with external environments (Senge, 2006). By helping leaders see how everything is connected and constantly evolving, organisations can understand how relational dynamics fit into and impact larger systems, such as stakeholder networks, the ecosystems or regulatory requirements all play interconnected roles. Meadows (2008) explains that systems

are not static but are in a continuous state of flux, requiring leaders to understand the feedback loops and leverage points that drive change. This allows them to address the complexity and interdependencies through holistic thinking, recognising patterns, and understanding how different components of a system interact and influence each other such as employees, stakeholders, and external factors (Williams et al., 2017), giving leaders the opportunity to adjust and improve. Recognising this, leaders who apply holistic thinking can proactively prepare for such events, fostering adaptability and innovation (Mugadza and Marcus, 2019; Holling, 2001).

However, despite its strengths and value, ST has its limitations, especially when applied as a standalone. It can sometimes lead to dehumanisation, as it may prioritise systemic efficiency over relational relations. ST's systems-focused lens may cause leaders to view employees as components of a system rather than as individuals with unique needs and contributions (Meadows, 2008). In so it can undermine trust, diminish motivation, and weaken the teams bonding, by eroding the humanistic values essential for a thriving workplace (Merali and Allen, 2011). Through its people-centric approach founded on the premise of prioritising individuals' well-being, SL inherently complements ST to counter depersonalisation, ensuring that relational and ethical dimensions are not overshadowed by the pursuit of systemic efficiency (Greenleaf, 1970). This SL and ST integration is particularly important as decisions made for the system as a whole may inadvertently harm certain individuals or groups, raising questions of fairness, equity and ethics of a pure systemic approach (Bansal, 2005). Although, there are researchers who find ethics to be "*a system discipline per se*" (Nilsson and Westerberg, 1997, p.498).

### 2.3.2. ST and Ethics

Pruzan and Thyssen (1990) concur that ethical issues can only be settled by taking a holistic, and therefore systemic view. Sipe and Frick (2015), ethics require a holistic approach as leaders who think systemically, connect systems thinking with ethical issues when they articulate and execute the strategy. According to Hammond (2005) asserts that systems thinking ‘*cultivates an ethic of integration and collaboration*’ that has the potential to transform the nature of organisations (p.20). However, Khalil (1993) argues that ethics is complex and situation-specific and so it takes cognitive power from the decision-maker, through systems reasoning, to come up with a new ethical decision. Similarly, Harter et al. (2004), argue that systems thinking ‘sensitises’ organisations and leaders to the implications of ethical lapses (p.9), ‘*yet it cannot morally judge the systems change*’ (Bansal and Song, 2017, p.128). Hence, servant-leadership becomes important, as when faced with different system changes, organisations/ leaders’ ethical values influence decisions towards the morally acceptable system (Bansal and Song, 2017). This highlights the important role of the leaders’ morality. Meadows (2008) explains that leveraging feedback loops within systems can create virtuous cycles of trust and engagement when ethical considerations are central to decision-making.

Integrating ST within a leadership approach that prioritise fairness, inclusion, and service would ensure that systemic decisions are grounded in moral accountability, which can lead to a more ethically motivated and loyal workforce (Sipe and Frick, 2009). Ethics are central to SL, which focus on the development and well-being of followers, build trust and psychological safe environment allowing for the free flow of information and ideas (Liden et al., 2008), factors that enhance the feedback loops of ST. This bridges the ethical gap in ST’s lack of ethical grounding, connecting it with SL’s emphasis on ‘seeing the whole’ from ethics to relations and decisions- A concept of wholeness (Tumolo, 2020).

## 2.4. SL and the notion of ‘Wholeness’: *A Systemic- Servant Connection*

The fundamental connection between SL and ST is anchored in the concept of wholeness. Checkland's (1981, p.4) definition of ST as the “conscious use of the particular concept of wholeness captured in the word 'system,' to order our thoughts”, establishes the theoretical foundation that emphasises understanding systems as interconnected wholes, where relationships between components are as significant as the components themselves. In leadership, this translates to balancing organisational objectives with the well-being of employees, stakeholders, and broader societal impacts. This perspective is deeply embedded in servant-leadership, with Zohar (1997) calling SL “the essence of quantum thinking and quantum leadership” (p.146). Sipe and Frick (2009) add that servant-leaders inherently function as systems thinkers, who “see things whole” and can “grasp the bigger picture instead of focusing on the minutiae *details*” (pp. 131, 137).

The integration of systems thinking in servant-leadership manifests through two crucial SL’s characteristics: conceptualization and foresight. Conceptualisation is the insight into followers, the organisation, and other institutions, offering a clearer wider picture for long-term decisions (Greenleaf, 2002). Spears (2010) notes that servant-leaders “stretch their thinking to encompass broader-based, conceptual thinking” (p. 28), while Northouse (2016) explains that SL’s conceptualization skill allows leaders to “*go beyond day-to-day operational thinking to focus on the big picture*” (p. 230). Greenleaf believed that this is a key to successful leadership, advising leaders “*When you look at anything or consider anything, look at it as “a whole” as much as you can before you swing on it*” (c.f. Sipe and Frick, 2009, p. 168). Through this lens, SL leaders can “*understand relationships between people, processes, structures, belief systems and a host of other factors*” (Sipe and Frick, 2009, p.179). Thus, conceptualisation allows servant-leaders to understand the system better

and the long-term impact of their decisions, which are crucial skills for a systemic perspective. For instance, in addressing employee engagement, seeing the whole involves not just improving individual motivation but also examining organisational culture, team dynamics, and external influences that shape engagement.

Meanwhile, foresight- *“The capacities used in concert to expand awareness to see things whole”* (Greenleaf, 1996, p.274), enables leaders to anticipate complexities and adapt accordingly to stay in the right direction (Sipe and Frick, 2015). Greenleaf (2002) emphasised that foresight is the central ethic in leadership, as a lack of foresight in the past may result in an unethical action in the present. He explained that foresight allows servant-leaders to *“cultivate heightened awareness, allowing them to see connections between history, people, events, possibilities, and deep intuition”* (c.f. Sipe and Frick, 2009, p. 176). Servant-leaders see things whole *“take the risks of being moved”* (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 329), to widen their awareness so that they can make more intense and meaningful contact with their situation (Greenleaf, 1996). Senge (1990) stating that systems thinking allows leaders to gain an *“awareness of interdependency”* (p 225), linking it further to SL. This implies that we are all interconnected parts of the whole that *“everything is related, and everything is part of a system”* (Sipe and Frick, 2015, p. 138), whereby shortfalls in any specific aspect will *“ultimately limit progress and outcomes in other parts, as well as in the whole”* (Spears and SanFacon, 2008, p. 9).

SL reflects this perspective by focusing on the well-being of all, particularly the vulnerable in asking *“Will they benefit, or at least not further be harmed?”* (p. 27). This principle, ties SL to ST ‘s focus on addressing root causes, understanding interdependencies, and building sustainable systems. Senge (2006) captures this synergy, stating, *“The essence of systems thinking lies in seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-and-effect chains, enabling*

leaders to navigate complexity more effectively” (p. 71). In that, ST provides the practical operating mechanisms to act on SL’s principles of wholeness.

On a more individual level, the emphasis on wholeness and synthesis in ST and SL also extends to interpersonal relationships. SL fosters relationships that are collaborative and interdependent (Page and Wong, 2000), building a culture where leaders and followers are viewed as parts of a whole (e.g., team, organisation, wider system). In describing this relationship, Greenleaf (1977) noted that *“in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share”* (p. 50). SL leaders strive to build inclusive environments within the business, sharing the same purpose of service, through which they can find their ‘wholeness’ together and with each other. This search extends beyond organizational boundaries, with leaders actively seeking to build relationships with external stakeholders.

Greenleaf (1996) urged leaders to value external constituencies and all those affected by the organisation, advising that *“one must be aware that all human endeavour, including the business, are a part of the larger and richer fabric of the whole universe”* (c.f. Zohar (2002), p. 120). Wheatley (1998) explains SL’s need to reach out for relationships with others as a way *“to create systems”* (p. 348). Servant-leaders create such systems by building collaborative alliances and partnerships among those who work in the organisation and other outside institutions (Spears, 2010). This is manifested through SL’s emphasis on community-building both inside and outside the organisation, suggesting that all that is needed is for *“enough servant-leaders to show the way, demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for specific community-related group”* (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 53). It would, however, be of great interest to this research to explore the underlying mechanism behind this leader’s behaviour in practice and how ST can enhance it, particularly in providing a pathway to advancing CS.

Thus, within SL systems thinking unfolds through conceptualisation and foresight enabling leaders to develop an acute awareness of others' needs, while recognising that business operates as a part of a wider, interdependent system. These skills help leaders align actions with long-term goals while considering the broader ethical implications, by focusing on the whole. This shows that the connection between ST and SL lies in their shared focus on interrelationships, ethical responsibility, and systemic impacts. This provides the conceptual foundation for the SL/ST integrated framework, whereby the notion of wholeness offers the philosophical approach, and ST delivers the tools needed to operationalise these principles. As Greenleaf (1977) asserts, "Leadership effectiveness lies in serving the whole, ensuring the well-being of individuals while sustaining the collective purpose" (p. 32). This systemic approach to leadership positions SL as particularly relevant for addressing systemic challenges and driving meaningful, sustainable change. Greenleaf's (1987) asserts that servant leaders "*use insights from systems disciplines in their quest to build healthier, wiser, freer, and more effective organisations*" (p.260) pinpointing the practical value of ST to SL. Such systemic approach requires '*moving in the right direction, being OK with the "mess", seeing the "whole", even in its complexity, and behaving ethically*' (Greenleaf, 1987, p.260). The emphasis on ethics in seeing things whole is particularly significant, as leaders who "zooms out" to see the wider picture to clearly understand causes and effects, profound relationships and outcomes of actions, would take personal moral responsibility to create positive change (Sipe and Frick, 2009). Kim (2004) asserted that developing such foresight is an ethical responsibility of a servant-leader "to be able to make predictions that can guide people to a better future", by considering the long-term ethical implications of their decisions (p.203). Similarly, Greenleaf (1996) warned that ethical and social failures, environmental destruction, and poverty are 'failures of foresight made one decision at a time' (p.318). Such a mindset not only supports the link between ethics and systems thinking (in 2.3.2) but also

highlights their combined relevance to corporate sustainability management, which requires a holistic alignment of ethical values and systemic impacts on various stakeholders across its systems (further discussed in sec. 2.6). This strong alignment points should favour a smoother integration of SL and ST, where both concepts mostly complement each-other, as further discussed next.

## **2.5. Exploring Systems Thinking as a practical Lens for Servant-Leadership Implementation**

This research aims to reframe SL through an ST lens, proposing a framework that balances others-serving leadership with systemic efficiency. Using a real-life case study of an international servant-led company, helps to gain insights on how integrating ST can enhance SL's processes and scalability, while addressing some of the pressing challenges regarding its practicality.

Servant-leadership has long been praised for its ethical grounding, relational orientation, and commitment to serving others, yet it continues to face criticism for its idealistic framing and lack of operational depth. Much of the literature has focussed heavily on its moral attributes without adequately addressing how these principles can be operationalised within complex dynamic organisational systems at scale. Parris and Peachey (2013) note that “while servant leadership offers compelling principles, it requires additional theoretical frameworks to bridge the gap between philosophy and practice” (p. 389). This research responds directly to this challenge by asking, how can SL's holistic, ethical and relational intentions (e.g., community building, shared responsibility and foresight) be evolved into a practical, scalable leadership framework that supports sustainable outcomes in complex organisational system.

To address this gap, this thesis proposes a novel integration of Systems thinking with SL principles to form a new framework: Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL). This integration

aims at responding to a real and persistent challenge in contemporary leadership studies in general and to SL's in specific, relating to the gap between normative ideals and practical application. While SL is often critiqued for lacking structure and adaptability, ST provides analytical tools that address complexity, feedback, interdependence, and leverage points. Conversely, ST has been criticised for its tendency to remain ethically neutral or mechanistic, prioritising system's efficiency over individuals' needs (Meadow, 2008). The proposed SSL framework therefore combines the strengths of both- ST's systemic clarity with SL's ethical and relational purpose. This study investigates how such a synthesis can enhance SL's sustainable implementation, scalability and so viability in global complex organisational contexts.

At the heart of this integration is the recognition that servant-leadership, as originally conceived by Greenleaf, already requires leaders to understand the interconnected nature of organisational life. Greenleaf (1977) in his writing implicitly stated that "the servant-leader needs to understand the whole picture to truly serve others" (p. 7). Moreso Greenleaf (1977) asserted that servant-leadership is more about "*engaging in a learning process that includes studying and developing hypotheses about how best to serve individuals*" (p.28). This statement characterises SL as a flexible process of testing, evaluating and contextual learning, core features of systems thinking. Such SL skills are crucial for managing complexities and adapting to different context and so merit to be spotlighted and formalised through strategic processes.

However, without such explicit adoption of a systems thinking perspective to operationalise its holistic understanding, this systemic inclination remains underdeveloped in both theory and practice (Sendjaya et al., 2018). Despite extensive discussions on SL and ST, the integration of these two frameworks remains underexplored. Current literature often emphasises SL's ethical foundations and ST's ability to address complexities, but research

highlighting the practical synergy between the two remain scarce. This study seeks to explore how can ST be of value to SL's sustainable implementation. This raises further questions that guide the empirical and conceptual work, such as: what are the practical tensions that arise when SL is implemented in real organisational settings? How can ST help resolve these tensions, and under what conditions? How can servant-leadership evolve to remain relevant and effective in an era of interconnected systems, global complexity, pressing sustainability demands?

The research draws on empirical data from an international case study (Company X) to analyse how SL values are enacted or constrained, within the wider organisational system. The data revealed that while servant-leaders often embody moral intentions and relational strengths, they struggle to sustain these practices amidst crisis and uncertainties, hierarchical structures and normative pressures. ST provides a lens to examine these systemic barriers and design new intervention strategies. For instance, in Seddon (2003) study of service sector organisations, ST application has been shown to provide a valuable structured method for "making the work works" (p 14). By exposing the reasons why, the system performs in the way it does and what thinking is driving the current design of the system only then that feedback loops, a crucial systems characteristic (Senge 2006) can be meaningfully embedded to structure interventions and improvement in the system as a whole (O'Donovan, 2014). This aligns with Ashby's (1958) views that service practices need to structure themselves to be able to deal with the demands of their operating environments.

This perspective supports the central argument of this research, that servant-leadership principles, being close to customers service practices, albeit encompassing all stakeholders, can be made more scalable and operational by embedding them within systems thinking approaches, especially in large, complex organisations where scalability is inherently difficult (O'Donovan, 2014). It demonstrates how studying a system from the user's (customer) point

of view enables organisations to uncover its true purpose and reconfigure operations accordingly. This, according to Seddon (2003) is to make the connection between the thinking in the system, the manifestation of that thinking in the actual system, and the resultant performance as experienced by the customer or stakeholder. This principle directly aligns with SL's emphasis on listening, empathy, and responsiveness, but ST application gave it a more practical structure. Feedback loops, stakeholder engagement, and systemic redesign, core principles of ST, appear to be critical mechanisms for operationalising SL beyond small, values-driven teams, elevating its holistic view from an ideal to a process for recognising emergent properties and interdependencies within the system (Chapman, 2004). However, Seddon and O'Donovan (2010) warn, before attempting any redesign, managers must unlearn the traditional command-and-control thinking, which they argues distorts systems away from their true purpose. This taps into SL's power dynamics critics, where ST challenges hierarchical thinking by encouraging leaders to control the system, not individuals. By operationalising SL principles of wholeness through ST-based mechanisms of interconnections, feedback loops, and learning, this research aims to address some of the limitations impeding SL's long-term implementation. Ultimately, this reinforces this research theoretical proposition that servant-leadership principles, when enhanced by systems thinking processes, could become more capable of addressing the complexity, scale, and ethical demands of contemporary organisational world.

However, this integration is not without challenges either. while ST promotes systemic coherence, it lacks ethical guidance to anchor decisions, which can at times marginalise individual agency or creativity (Meadow, 2008; Senge, 2006), potentially undermining the very empowerment SL seeks to foster (Greenleaf, 1977). This research aims at addressing such concerns by proposing a contextual, rich methodology that explores both leader and follower perspectives, to better understand where ST strengthens SL and vice versa. Rather

than assuming ST is universally compatible with SL, the research investigates its conditional applicability- under what conditions can ST enhance SL's elements, and when might it risk undermining ethical considerations?

Through this inquiry, the study aims at developing the Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) framework, which aims at addressing SL's idealism by reframing it as a practical leadership model embedded in system design, while also expanding ST's ethical scope by grounding systems interventions in values, individual development and community bonds.

This contribution is timely and important, as organisations today face unprecedented complexity, from climate change to digital transformation to global inequality. The dominant leadership paradigms often characterised by centralised control and lack of foresight have repeatedly failed to address these systemic challenges. Tuan and Shaw (2016) elaborated that the potential conflict between traditional business and ethics is often related to managerial short-sightedness, requiring a holistic view to solve them more ethically. This aligns with Greenleaf's (1996) original definition of SL's holistic approach as having: '*foresight- the capacities to see things whole*' (p.274), which he asserted is "*the central ethic of leadership*" (p. 37). Accordingly, ethics go hand in hand with systems thinking in guiding leaders through the complexities, delineating the basis of the integrated SSL framework. Thus, this study does not present the SSL as a solution to all of SL's limitations but as a theoretical framework that could enhance, clarify, and contextualise SL's core strengths, when applied ethically and systemically. SSL offers a framework that is both ethically principled and systemically aware. It enables leaders to bridge the gap between purpose and process, providing a promising pathway for advancing sustainability, by fostering individual, organisational and systems well-being.

## **2.6. Systemic Servant Leadership: *A pathway to Corporate***

### ***Sustainability (CS)***

Corporate Sustainability (CS) presents one of the most urgent and complex leadership challenges of our time. Increasingly, organisations are required to go beyond compliance and efficiency to embrace long-term, value-driven change. CS demands not only a strategic balance across environmental, social, and economic dimensions, but also ethical responsibility toward a wide network of stakeholders. As theorised by Ashrafi et al. (2018), CS is “a holistic approach to delivering value in social, environmental, and economic spheres in a long-term perspective, supporting greater responsibility and focus on ethical values” (p. 679). However, while Ashrafi et al.’s framework amongst many others aim to balance the three dimensions, they often fail to account for the dynamic tensions and interdependencies among them (Lozano, 2018). CS is no longer solely about balancing the three domains, it is increasingly about understanding how the organisation is embedded in and affects broader, interdependent systems (Gibbons, 2020). This calls for leadership that can simultaneously navigate structural complexity and uphold moral commitments, a combination that neither traditional models nor isolated paradigms have yet fully delivered. Davis and Stroink (2016) stress that the traditional, mechanistic way of thinking is inadequate to accurately perceive the multifaceted, fluid, and emergent nature of complex social, environmental, and economic phenomena.

Gibbons (2020) described this as the shift to a “next wave of sustainability” (p.1), where the underlying thinking distinguishes the new paradigm from the old. Whereas earlier approaches focused on stakeholder value in the long term, the current paradigm acknowledges that organisations are nested within broader, interconnected systems. Peiró et al. (2021) warns that we are entering a new global order, and how we approach it will either enable or hinder

the achievement of a sustainable world. This growing recognition calls for a leadership model that is ethically grounded and equipped to navigate systemic tensions and complexity. In this tight, Ferdig (2007) argued that CS demands a rethinking of leadership itself, whereby leaders must understand interdependencies and act with an awareness that all actions are linked within dynamic systems. Likewise, Metcalf and Benn (2013) asserts that CS leaders must operate within complex adaptive systems and navigate uncertainties, requiring emotional intelligence, ethical motivation, and the ability to facilitate systemic change. Lozano (2018) added that such leaders must be capable of perceiving emergent conditions and managing the uncertainties of CS. In addition to the growing need for ethics-driven CS leadership (e.g., Ashrafi et al., 2018; Marcus et al., 2015; Millar et al., 2013; Mihelic et al., 2010; Ferdig, 2007), systems thinking, therefore, become vital too, offering tools to identify leverage points for change and maintain systemic balance (Willamo et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2018; Checkland, 2012; Holling, 2001). As Ferdig (2007) argued, systems thinking leaders are more capable of making responsive and complementary decisions within sustainability domains. These shifts towards how to balance the interdependent environmental, social, and economic dimensions, place new demands on leadership to think systemically, act ethically, and engage inclusively across CS boundaries.

What emerges from this review is a clear question- What type of leadership can ethically respond to the interrelated tensions and complexity of CS across systems? Several scholars have called for an ethics-driven leadership framework, advocating using systems thinking to manage stakeholder tensions and support long-term sustainability (Knight et al., 2018; Kantabutra and Ketprapakorn, 2020; Lozano, 2018; Starik and Kanashiro, 2013). Millar et al. (2012) noted the importance of visionary, sense-making leaders who act with awareness beyond organisational boundaries. Ferdig (2007) envisioned ethical leaders who “reach beyond self-interest”, consciously take action to nurture sustainable systems (p.1). Ayoubi et

al. (2015, p.5) similarly stressed the value of a suitable adaptive, ethical leadership, which should perform as “an evolutionary or a serving style” to empower followers and motivate them in learning and in using their autonomy. Similarly, Ferdig (2007) stated that CS requires a leadership ultimately grounded in a personal ethic Likewise, Dreier et al. (2019) stressed that the complex CS challenges call for “*holistic, synergistic and people-centred approaches – engaging all stakeholders – to achieve them*” (p 8). Such leaders view their role as leader ‘with’ others instead of a leader ‘of’ or ‘over’ others and who cannot effectively operate outside of the holistic interconnections that exist among and between people and systems (Ferdig, 2007, p.27).

However, despite growing interest in ethics-based leadership, and systems thinking for CS, empirical research into frameworks that combining both, and how such integration occurs in practice is limited (Peiro et al., 2021; Rodrigues and Franco, 2019; Williams, 2017; Davis and Stroink, 2016; Lozano, 2015; Checkland, 2012). Many Scholars like Lozano (2018), assert that such framework should integrate leadership behaviours, organisational practices, stakeholders, change, and sustainability dimensions, over the long-term. However, as Knight and Paterson (2018) highlighted, the specific competencies and behaviours required for such a CS leadership not only is incomplete but also remain ambiguous and understudied.

Rodrigues and Franco (2019) recently found that CS leadership still need more theoretical and empirical research, to equip leaders in developing and effectively implementing CS strategy.

Acknowledging these gaps, this study addresses a critical question in leadership and sustainability research, on how servant-leadership can be systemically embedded to respond to the complex, ethical, and structural demands of contemporary organisations. Particularly, it addresses a key question left underexplored in existing literature: *Can a combined SL-ST approach offer a more effective and ethically grounded pathway for implementing Corporate*

*Sustainability in complex organisational settings?* While both SL and ST have been studied extensively in isolation, their intersection remains largely understudied. Liden et al. (2008) and Eva et al. (2019) have called for more empirical research into the mechanisms through which servant leaders influence organisational behaviour, culture, and sustainability, particularly through qualitative methods that capture lived realities.

This study explores this through a qualitative case study of Company X, using Corporate Sustainability as an important context to examine the potential of a systemically evolved servant-leadership. International organisations are especially subjected to greater internal and external pressures to participate in the SDGs (Dyllick and Muff, 2015), and their leaders are expected to play active roles in tackling these issues, or at least to consider their impacts on society and the environment. Particularly, manufacturing companies are under even more pressure to reduce their environmental and social impacts in all their practices (Giret et al., 2015). In particular, this research investigates how do SL behaviour vary (Liden et al., 2008) when situated within complex systems, and how systems thinking processes can guide communication, learning, innovation, and inclusive evaluation in ways that support adaptive, context-sensitive sustainability. For instance, Covey (2002) identified empowerment as an important element to the sustainable success of today's international organisations, however, has not specifically explained in what way. Exploring how ST can enhance empowerment and relating mechanisms, at multi-levels in practice, could help guiding leaders of international manufacturing companies through managing the complexities of CS. In doing so, this study offers the integrated Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) framework, as both a conceptual and practical contribution, that combines SL's ethical grounding with the analytical and structural capacities of ST.

SL and ST each bring distinct but complementary capacities to this challenge. ST equips leaders to understand interconnections, feedback loops, and leverage points across systems

(Bansal and DesJardine, 2014; Senge, 2006), offering diagnostic tools to address root causes and enable long-term change. Yet, it reveals dynamics but does not guide morally responsible action (Bansal and Song, 2017; Meadow, 2008). This is where SL becomes indispensable. Grounded in ethical values to serve others and foster human development (Greenleaf, 1977), SL ensures leadership remains rooted in trust, empathy, and shared purpose. However, SL alone lacks the structural and systemic perspective necessary to navigate the adaptive, interconnected dilemmas of modern world challenges, particularly in large, manufacturing organisations facing competing stakeholder needs and operational complexity.

By situating SSL within the context of CS, this study does more than advocate for leadership change, it seeks to enable leaders to see the system, act on it, and serve within it, positioning SSL as not only aligned with the ideals of CS but structurally and morally better equipped to manage it. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the ongoing conversation about what kind of leadership is needed to meet the systemic and ethical challenges of our time. It proposes that the SSL is not simply a novel integration, but a necessary evolution, that could enable organisations to embed sustainability not as a compliance goal, but as a morally driven and systemically embedded way of working.

## **2.7. Summary**

The critical analysis of servant-leadership reveals a complex picture of both challenges and value. The limitations become particularly evident in issues of scalability, power and adaptability across diverse complex organisational contexts. However, evidence shows that SL remains essential in contemporary business settings, primarily because of its potential to transform organisational cultures toward more sustainable and people-centred practices. While it cannot address all organisational challenges, its emphasis on service, employee development and ethical values provides a valuable leadership for modern organisations.

The literature highlights a critical gap in SL implementation, regarding the need for more practical operational frameworks to better operationalise SL principles at scale. Drawing upon this, McClellan (2008), argued that the challenge does not lie in translating servant-leadership into the real-world, but rather in the development of servant-leaders who can engage in its practice. By integrating ST, the aim of this study is to propose a leadership framework that provides a foundation for evolving servant-leadership to meet complex contemporary organisational needs while maintaining its core principles, enhancing its practicality and adaptability across diverse contexts. While challenges exist in integrating servant-leadership and systems thinking, the potential benefits make it worth pursuing. As Greenleaf (1987) noted, servant leaders who employ systems thinking create "healthier, wiser, freer, and more effective organisations" (p. 260).

The literature has shown that systems thinking is a common foundational element of both SL and CS holistic constructs, yet, this theoretical perspective has been understudied within both fields, despite growing numbers of scholars advocating ST's utility for leaders to guide their organisation through uncertainties. This research contributes to the theoretical development of servant-leadership and its practical application, exploring through a qualitative case study of Company X, how systems thinking can strengthen SL's application in the long term.

The key stance of this research does not lie in outright adoption or rejection of servant-leadership, but to explore a systemic re-conceptualisation which could offer a promising path forward on how to implement and adapt SL to specific contexts while preserving its valuable aspects. Ultimately, the aim is to redefine the scope of SL by embedding it within ST processes, offering insights into how it can be evolved to meet the ethical, adaptive, and complex demands for a sustainable future. This overarching aim guides the subsequent methodology of this research.

# Chapter 3- Methodology

## 3. Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used for the single qualitative case study adopted in this research, to explore the long-term implementation of servant-leadership through systems thinking within an international manufacturing organisation. The study employs thematic analysis to examine how SL practices are sustained over time, emphasising participant descriptions of ways of working and the researcher's elaboration of the way the themes come together into practice. Central to this approach is the integration of systemic storytelling as both a theoretical lens and an analytical tool, enabling a rich exploration of how narratives interconnect to form the lived realities of leadership practices and organisational processes. The chapter begins with research philosophy (section 3.1) that informed the research design. Justifications will be presented for adopting a subjectivist ontological stance in-line with interpretivist epistemology, subsequent to contrasting the different spectrums. Section 3.2 discusses the research design and the qualitative methodological choice. Progressing to section 3.3, presenting the research strategy, followed by the data collection methods, the sampling selection, context, interview guides and administration in section (3.4). The thematic analysis methods are covered in section (3.5), followed by the ethical considerations (3.6) and research rigour (3.7). Concluding with the summary in section (3.8).

### 3.1. Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to “*a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge*” (Saunders et al., 2016, p.124). The selection of such a stance often considers the Ontological and Epistemological assumptions that affects how the research problem is

considered, and how knowledge is gained (Creswell, 2013). This study is approached from a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, best suited to understanding the long-term implementation of SL through ST within complex organisational contexts, such as CS. The integration of storytelling as both a theoretical lens and an analytical tool, helped to capture dynamic realities and facilitates the understanding of organisational life. It is widely acknowledged as 'instrumental' to leadership and organisation change as it recognises that stories serve as meaning-making mechanisms through which individuals and organisations articulate their experiences, roles, relationships, and organisational contexts (Boje, 2008; Gabriel, 2000). These philosophies are foundational to understanding the long-term implementation of SL as a relational, socially constructed process, revealing how the integrated SSL framework is enacted, influencing organisational and sustainable practices.

### **3.1.1. Ontology and Epistemology**

Ontology, the study of the nature of reality, frames this research within a constructivist paradigm, recognising that social phenomena, such as SL and ST are not fixed entities but are continuously shaped by social actors (Bryman, 2012). A purely subjectivist ontology would focus on individual interpretations of SL (Crotty, 1998), but the theoretical systems thinking lens adopted here, necessitates examining how these interpretations are connected, operationalised, and sustained across the organisation. Rather than defining an objective reality of SL behaviours and processes, this study seeks to uncover the varied ways in which they manifest through leaders' and followers' descriptions. Constructivism mirrors this by highlighting that organisational realities are not objective, but are continuously evolving through social interactions, shared narratives, and interpretations of social actors (Mckinley, 2015; Boje (2001)).

By framing leadership as an emergent, relational phenomenon shaped by interactions between leaders, followers, and systemic processes, constructivism aligns with SL's emphasis on fostering relational connections (Bryman, 2012). Constructivism's premise that reality is co-created and evolving, supports ST's emphasis on interconnectedness and adaptive evolution, further highlighting ST's utility as a practical lens to studying SL. For example, practices like "empowerment" are not static behaviours but emerge from collective perceptions, shaped by contextual factors such as sustainability goals, offering deeper insights into the systemic processes that sustain SL over time.

This ontological position, therefore, aligns with the research approach that values interconnectedness, multiplicity of perspectives and contextual nuance. By analysing participants' diverse, competing narratives, the study sought to capture how SL is enacted through relational and system-thinking processes, and how it evolves within interconnected systems. As such, contributing to the understanding of what it means to lead in a systemic servant manner within complex contexts such as CS.

**Epistemologically**, this research adopts an interpretivist stance, emphasising the subjective, contextual, and relational nature of knowledge creation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

Consistent with constructivism, interpretivism rejects the notion of a single objective reality and instead posits that knowledge is constructed through individuals' perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Goldkuhl, 2012). This focus on meaning-making is crucial for capturing the relational, context-dependent nature of SL and ST, such as in relation to CS (Drath and Palus, 199), both requiring an understanding of participants' descriptions of behaviours and processes.

Participant accounts serve as rich, contextualised narratives that bridge abstract SL theory (e.g., Greenleaf's "servant-first" ideal) with grounded insights into its implementation, addressing calls for deeper qualitative exploration of SL's holistic and unique dimensions

(Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2008). For instance, an employee's description of "feeling heard" illuminates how SL behaviours like "listening" (Spears, 2010), are operationalised, while a leader's account of "balancing profit and purpose" illustrates how systems thinking strategies are embedded into processes in real-world contexts. In that, it complements constructivism by examining how leaders and followers interpret and enact SL within complex systems, to develop "new, richer understandings" (Saunders et al., 2016, p.136). This interpretivist stance, therefore, justifies the reliance on qualitative data, specifically thematic analysis to explore how the integration of SL and ST principles are operationalised in practice, prioritising depth over generalisation.

In centring participants' narratives, both philosophies draw on organisational storytelling as a theoretical justification for this focus, which emphasises the connection and evolutions of stories within given contexts. The "systematicity" of storytelling, was stressed by many scholars, such as Boje (2014) highlighting that stories are "interactive, intertextual, and 'inter-determinate' with system and environment activity" (p.p. 223-224). Such a systemic lens to storytelling is well-suited for capturing fragmented and dynamic nature, inherent in both SL and ST. It allows for the understanding and communicating narratives that consider the interconnections between multiple stories, actors, and how they influence each other within a larger system (Boje, 2014; Reed, 2006). This helps to understand the context in which SL and ST are practiced, which is essential for identifying best long-term SSL practices and underlying processes.

### **3.1.2. Systemic Storytelling: *Bridging Ontology and Epistemology in complex contexts***

Boje (2001) asserts that storytelling acts as both an ontological and epistemological tool, affirming that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through language and interaction. Drawing on a constructivist ontology, Czarniawska (2004), and Gabriel (2000) position storytelling to explore the interconnectedness of these narratives, forming the lived realities of SL practices. However, constructivism's focus on multiplicity risks overlooking the deep-rooted inertia (cultural/structural) that resist change, particularly in complex contexts where SL's adaptability is tested. Understanding these underlying processes is essential for identifying the barriers to effective SL implementation, particularly how ST intervention can enhance organisations' ability to embrace adaptive strategies that align with SL principles. Storytelling addresses this limitation by bridging ontology and epistemology, whereby interpretivism uses stories as a shared sense-making tool, offering a holistic window into the lived experiences of SL rather than as isolated data.

In accordance with this research approach, adopting a systemic lens in analysing narrative/stories is critical as it acknowledges that SL operates within interdependent systems (e.g., teams, departments, community), and that its sustainability depends on its effective integration into these systems. It allows for a deeper understanding of the complexity of SL's implementation, by considering the entire system and how stories are interwoven within it (Barad, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004). This aligns with the study's goal to critically examine how narratives uncover systemic enablers to servant-leadership in international manufacturing organisations, offering a pragmatic lens to study SL's long-term viability in complex contexts.

By analysing narrative patterns, systemic storytelling exposes consistencies and contradictions in leadership and employee narratives, revealing behavioural themes that foster long-term SL implementation. For instance, recurring narratives about “employee development” may highlight both informal behavioural norms such as mentorship and formal systems like performance reviews. In that, the research not only documents what SL looks like in practice but also clarifies the underlying processes through which these practices are enacted and sustained over time, particularly in complex settings (Checkland, 2000).

However, noting the sheer volume and diversity of conceptual frameworks associated with SL (sec. 2.2), it is often difficult to frame SL as a rigid set of behaviours, especially with complex settings. A systems thinking perspective recognises this, highlighting that SL’s behaviours might manifest differently within different contexts. The importance of context in storytelling was stressed by Boje (1991), elucidating its value for understanding how SL adapts to, or is constrained by, complex global systems, offering actionable insights for sustainable practices within a larger organisations. For instance, a participant might describe how a servant leader’s empowerment led to the development of employees-led community program, revealing how servant-leadership is enhanced when challenges like profit and purpose are viewed as interconnected parts (Reed, 2006). This contextual understanding is essential for identifying best long-term practices, their variance and underlying processes in servant-leadership and systems thinking that makes up the SSL framework.

Overall, constructivist and interpretivist, through systemic storytelling, offer a robust framework to explore how the integrated SSL practices enact through the interplay of diverse narratives, fostering sustainable implementation of SL principles and corporate sustainability within organisations. Guided by this methodological frameworks, thematic analysis differentiates between ‘themes’- which reflect participant accounts of ways of working- and

'processes' - which represent the researcher's elaboration of how these themes interact within the organisation. Additionally, by cross-checking participant accounts with company documents and existing literature, the study ensures that its findings remain both contextually and theoretically grounded, contributing rich insights into practical perspective on leadership in the modern corporate world, while maintaining methodological rigour.

### **3.2. Research Design and Methodological Approach**

This study adopts a theoretically informed approach to understanding servant-leadership implementation through systems thinking. For this purpose, it required a careful consideration of the research design and methodology to use, connecting the empirical data to the research questions and ultimately to its conclusions (Tracy, 2013).

An inductive research design is generally well-suited for studies that incorporate storytelling, as it begins with specific observations (e.g., stories) and moves toward broader theoretical frameworks. It allows for the exploration of complex, interconnected phenomena like SL and ST from the ground up (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Storytelling along with constructivist and interpretivist epistemologies, inherently focuses on individuals co-constructed realities and meanings, making inductive approach ideal for generating insights grounded in participants lived experiences and systemic interactions rather than testing predefined hypotheses (Creswell, 2013).

Unlike deductive designs, which often rely on fixed variables and frameworks which risks overlooking systemic dynamic, and interdependent factors, the inductive approach favours unexpected findings and evolving insights (Boje, 2001). It allows for the emergence of patterns and themes, from rich, context-specific empirical data such as interviews rather than imposing preconceived categories (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013; Thornberg, 2012). This study particularly, seeks a deeper exploration of the mechanisms through which SL and ST

integrated principles become embedded in organisational processes to create sustainable outcomes, within complex systems. Inductive approach allows for the exploration of patterns such as on how leaders and followers co-create SL practices through ST within interconnected systems, acknowledging their inherently exploratory, dynamic and context-sensitive natures which is manifested differently across contexts (Nowell et al, 2017; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). This flexibility is crucial when investigating how SL is enacted and sustained within interdependent systems, as it captures the nuanced interplay between individual experiences and systemic processes, generating actionable knowledge for organisations navigating leadership complexities.

However, although, inductive approach is essential for this study as it acknowledges the complexity of SL as a systemic practice, it is often limited by its reliance on subjective interpretation and potential researcher bias, as well as challenges in generalising findings from context-specific data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Creswell, 2013). Existing theories (e.g., Greenleaf's servant-leadership model) inform but do not constrain the analysis, allowing emergent patterns to surface. This open-ended nature can also lead to data overload, making it difficult to synthesize clear conclusions. To mitigate these issues, the research uses data triangulation from multiple sources (Antwi and Hamza, 2015; Tracy, 2013.) along with other strategies discussed further in section (3.7).

According to Saunders et al. (2016) collecting qualitative data inductively would enable the development of "*a richer theoretical perspective than already exists in the literature*" (p.168). Qualitative study allows the researcher to understand the full picture rather than breaking data into quantitative variables (Ary et al., 2014). This highlights the importance of storytelling; according to Gabriel (2000) stories have the power to reveal symbolic and emotional dimensions of leadership, which characterise both SL and ST, and cannot be quantifiable. Laub (2005) stresses this, noting that "*Servant-leadership involves issues of the*

*heart and of the soul, topics that do not fit well within the cold analysis of the scientific model”* (p. 174), such as how ‘healing’ resonates within sustainability. Likewise, the more complex elements of ST such as systemic influences, the nature of interdependencies and connectedness, are inherently qualitative and resist straightforward measurement (Senge, 1990; Checkland, 1981). In so, addressing a methodological gap in SL, ST and CS fields, on the scarcity of qualitative research to deeply demonstrate their combined outcomes (Eva et al (2019; Morsing and Oswald, 2009; Checkland, 1999). Considering the aim of this research on exploring how SL and ST converge in real-world contexts such as CS, a qualitative case study method was chosen, since it is best for exploring the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of human experiences (Fletcher, 2017; Walliman, 2006.).

### **3.3. Case Study Strategy**

The strategy provides a ‘methodological link’ between the research philosophy and the data collection and analysis methods (Saunders et al., 2016, p.177), depending on the suitability to successfully fulfil the research aims. There is limited knowledge of how to foster a practical servant-leadership behaviours and processes, within large complex organisational contexts (Eva et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2012). This research addresses this gap from a different perspective than the idealistic lens prevalent in SL studies (Van Dierendonck, 2011). It proposed to explore SL through a systems thinking lens, identifying emergent SL+ST behavioural themes and clarifying the underlying processes that can foster a long-term sustainable implementation of SL as rather a systemic practice.

To fulfil such aims, a case study strategy was adopted as it is considered the most appropriate for answering questions that seek to explain how a phenomenon is influenced by another in the real-world context (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Case study in general acts as an “empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth,

within its real-world context, and relies on multiple sources of evidence, converged in a triangulating fashion (3)” (Yin 2018, p.p. 45-46). Accordingly, proving particularly useful for this study, as it allows researchers to gather deeper and richer data from the perspectives of both leaders and follower. It also highlights the power of qualitative case studies to accommodate *"contextual understandings"* usually of the *"behaviour, values, and other rich details in terms of the context in which the research is conducted"* (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 411).

A single case study design is chosen for this research exploring the interplay of ST and SL, and their integrated impact on CS because it aligns methodologically with the inherently holistic and context-sensitive nature of these concepts, lead to significant contributions to knowledge (Dudovskiy, 2016). According to Yin (2018), a single-case study that examines an organisation as a whole is particularly advantageous when the underlying theories underlying are mainly holistic. This is the case for ST and SL and CS, as each embodies a holistic, interconnected nature, requiring an in-depth understanding of their interrelated components within interconnected system.

This depth is critical because SSL’s impact emerges from the synergies between servant-leadership behaviours and systemic processes, a complexity that multiple or comparative designs might oversimplify or dilute (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Given that ST provides a framework for understanding interconnectedness within organisational context; by focusing on a single, information-rich case, the study can identify the complex, interdependent context where ST-informed SL strategies triggers mechanisms for sustainable SL practices in larger organisations. This rich, contextual analysis facilitated by case study design, is essential for generating insights that not only advance theoretical understanding but also inform practical applications in real-business context (Willson, 2010). Especially relevant since SL research is

more prevalent in small companies, and more knowledge is needed on improving SL practices within larger system (Eva et al., 2019).

Generalisability limitations may be questioned though, but as Yin (2018) emphasises, single-case studies prioritize analytical generalisation, advancing theoretical insights that inform similar contexts rather than statistical extrapolation (sec.3.7). Moreover, triangulation of diverse data sources (interviews leaders/ followers/managerial/regional, organisational documents, and media) is facilitated through case study strategy. Thereby, enhancing validity while preserving the richness (Bryman and Bell, 2015) required to capture the whole picture of how ST shapes the long-term implementation of SL principles. Ultimately, helping to fulfil the research's aim on understanding how ST and SL interact and co-evolve in practice, revealing the mechanisms through which SSL practices are embedded and sustained over time, while offering a nuanced, context-grounded contribution to theory and practice.

### **3.4. Data collection Approach**

#### **3.4.1. Case Participants Sampling**

The “case” could be chosen according to the information collected during stage one of the research, which would highlight any particularly unique qualities that may be of interest.

Thus, it enables the researcher to predefine the suitability of participants based on the aims of the research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Considering the present study's aims, an organisation profiling was therefore established. Identifying potential organisations was facilitated by the list of 100 SL-led companies sent by the Greenleaf servant-leadership Centre UK (Appendix 1), and were considered if they met the following criteria of the research aims:

- a) Exemplify SL principles and have openly declared so in more than one publication.
- b) Is an international organisation with a base in the UK (*reasons explained further on*).

- c) Have produced annual sustainability reports.

After considering various options, purposive sampling was chosen as it “*focuses on special cases that, through their unique qualities, can help to develop understanding or explain more typical cases*” (Saunders et al., 2016, p.301). For instance, the fact that the objectives of the research do not require quantitative data meant that random selection sampling would be inappropriate, whereas purposive sampling specifically allows to “identify typical cases” that adhere to the above selection criteria (Walliman, 2006, p.76). Additionally, when selecting participants within the organisation for a research study, it is important to first define the target population in accordance with the objectives of the research (Saunders et al., 2016). For that, purposive sampling was also used in the screening of leaders that represent the multi-managerial and regional fragmented sample.

Documentary analysis was conducted beforehand on the chosen servant-led company to evaluate its leadership practices, particularly with respect to servant-leadership behaviours. Upon establishing that the organisation and its leadership are actively engaged in SL behaviours and practices, and CS activities, an initial contact was made with the Chief People, Culture and Capability Officer, in USA headquarters, via the company’s email. Within the reply, an MS Teams call was then set-up to discuss the research and the company’s willingness to participate. The second contact was made from the company by email, agreeing to participate and confirming that an internal email regarding the research was sent throughout the organisation globally, with my details, to managers and employees respectively, asking for their willingness to participate. As the aim of this research was to gain insight from both leaders and followers, interviews were sought from the managers’ subordinates as well. Contacts were made then via emails with potential respondents from

both groups (managers/employees) who contacted me willing to participate and to set dates and times for the interviews.

Snowball sampling was then used to connect with additional participants within each group. It is a method frequently used within qualitative research, especially in servant-leadership studies (Jabarkhail, 2020), whereby participants suggest another potential participant who also fits the study's criteria until saturation is reached (Tracy, 2013). Data saturation occurs when the relevant information has been determined and continuing would not contribute further to the theory (Lowe et al., 2018). After the 51<sup>st</sup> interview, it was noted that the same answers and themes were emerging within the data, thus, it was determined that data saturation had been reached, and the interview process was then stopped.

Both sampling methods proved valuable, resulting in a rich, fragmented sample of 51 participants in total- 24 leaders from different managerial levels (6 Senior, 8 Middle, 10 Lower levels) and 27 of their subordinates, across different departments and regions. The participants and interview information are shown in Table. 3. Codes were assigned to participants to maintain anonymity and to reference the interview transcripts.

**Table.3 - The participants and interview information**

	Senior Level	Middle Level	Lower Level	Employees		
Interview #	Interview Code	Gender	Level	Country	Interview length	Method
1	01.SL.US	M	SM	US	45 mins	Ms Teams call
2	02.EM.US	F	EM	US	33 mins	Ms Teams call
3	03.LL.UK	F	LM	UK	63 mins	Ms Teams call
4	04.ML.BL	F	MM	Belarus	50mins	Ms Teams call
5	05.SL.NL	M	SM	Netherlands	48mins	Ms Teams call
6	06.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	36 mins	Ms Teams call
7	07.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	37 mins	Ms Teams call
8	08.EM.UK	M	EM	UK	42mins	Ms Teams call
9	09.SL.US	M	SM/CEO	US	50 mins	Zoom call
10	10.ML.LX	M	MM	Luxembourg	52 mins	Ms Teams call
11	11.SM.US	M	SM	US	60 mins	Ms Teams call
12	12.ML.UK	M	MM	UK	51 mins	Zoom call
13	13.LL.UK	M	LM	UK	73 mins	Ms Teams call
14	14.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	47 mins	Ms Teams call
15	15.EM.UK	M	EM	UK	31 mins	Ms Teams call
16	16.EM.NL	M	EM	Netherlands	42 mins	Ms Teams call
17	17.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	41 mins	Ms Teams call
18	18.ML.UK	F	MM	UK	47 mins	Ms Teams call
19	19.EM.IR	M	EM	Ireland	38 mins	Ms Teams call
20	20.LL.UK	M	LM	UK	46 mins	Ms Teams call
21	21.EM.NL	M	EM	Netherlands	38 mins	Ms Teams call
22	22.SL.UK	M	SM	UK	53 mins	Zoom call
23	23.LL.NL	M	LM	Netherlands	67 mins	Ms Teams call
24	28.LL.LX	M	LM	Luxembourg	53mins	Ms Teams call

25	25.ML.UK	F	MM	UK	48 mins	Ms Teams call
26	26.ML.UK	F	MM	UK	55 mins	Ms Teams call
27	27.EM.LX	M	EM	Luxembourg	38 mins	Ms Teams call
28	28.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	42 mins	Ms Teams call
29	29.SL.US	M	SM	US	57 mins	Ms Teams call
30	30.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	42 mins	Ms Teams call
31	31.EM.NL	F	EM	Netherlands	37 mins	Ms Teams call
32	32.EM.LX	M	EM	Luxembourg	41 mins	Ms Teams call
33	33.ML.NL	F	MM	Netherlands	47 mins	Ms Teams call
34	39.ML.IB	F	MM	Iberia	49 mins	Ms Teams call
35	35.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	46 mins	Ms Teams call
36	36.EM.BL	M	EM	Belarus	39 mins	Ms Teams call
37	37.LL.NL	M	LM	Netherlands	55 mins	Ms Teams call
38	38.EM.UK	F	EM	UK	34 mins	Ms Teams call
39	39.EM.BL	F	EM	Belarus	39 mins	Ms Teams call
40	40.EM.UK	M	EM	UK	40 mins	Ms Teams call
41	41.EM.FR	M	EM	France	41 mins	Ms Teams call
42	42.EM.NL	M	EM	Netherlands	35 mins	Ms Teams call
43	43.EM.SP	F	EM	Spain	37 mins	Ms Teams call
44	44.EM.IB	F	EM	Iberia	38 mins	Ms Teams call
45	45.LL.NL	M	LM	Netherlands	47 mins	Ms Teams call
46	46.LL.UK	M	LM	UK	37 mins	Ms Teams call
47	47.EM.NL	M	EM	Netherlands	35 mins	Ms Teams call
48	48.EM.SP	F	EM	Spain	33 mins	Ms Teams call
49	49.LL.UK	F	LM	UK	45 mins	Ms Teams call
50	50.ML.FR	F	LM	France	40 mins	Ms Teams call
51	51.EM.NL	M	EM	Netherlands	35 mins	Ms Teams call

Any information from which the participants could be identified has been omitted to maintain confidentiality. Employees were coded as: the chronological order of the interview. EM. country initials, e.g., 01.EM.UK. Managers were coded as: order of the interview, followed

by the first two initials representing their managerial level: Senior managers (SM), Middle Managers (MM), Lower Managers (LM), then country initial, e.g., 01.MM.FR (France).

Thus, it explicitly demonstrates the variance in the sample and allows easy organisation and referencing in the findings' chapters.

### **3.4.2. Case study context**

This study uses ST as a lens to explore how the key elements of SL function together within the case organisation. In doing so, this research will suggest how CS can be addressed, demonstrating how a systemic approach to SL (SSL) can be implemented in complex organisational contexts. To address this, the research focuses on Company X (pseudonym), an international manufacturing company, with over 600 employees across 15 countries, including UK. Established in the 1950s, Company X expanded globally in the 1970s and went public shortly thereafter. By the late 1990s, the company introduced major systemic developments, including embedding SL principles into its culture, positioning itself as a purpose-driven organisation that prioritises putting people above everything- a core tenet of SL (ESG Report, 2022). This aligns with contingency theory, which emphasises how organisational structure and leadership practices must adapt to technological and operational complexities, reflecting Company X, as a global manufacturing organisation need for coordination across diverse complex environments (Luthans, 1973; Woodward, 1958). It describes its business model as fully aligned with servant-leadership principles and modern sustainable practices, as evidenced by biennial reports on its servant-oriented practices (p.38). Company X integrated approach to environmental, social, and governance issues and its holistic innovation strategy that aims for long-term systemic transformations reflect a strong systems thinking orientation. This becomes further apparent through their values that are systematically ordered to ultimately achieve their main value (#1) of doing the right thing by its stakeholders. The company self-identifies as servant-led with over 40-year legacy of

...serving, making it an exemplary case for studying SL implementation in a complex, international context.

The international scope of Company X adds critical depth to the study. As a single case study, it allows for rich and multi-perspective insights, which an international company with various departments and bases across US and Europe would help to gather. This makes Company X subjected to diverse legal and social norms, and sustainability pressures. which enables to explore how accounted SL behaviours, viewed through an ST lens, vary across different contexts, addressing gaps in SL literature that has mainly focused on American companies (Peterson et al., 2012; Eva et al., 2019). This is crucial to understand how integrated SL practices contribute to corporate sustainability (Miller and Parker, 2013) given the growing pressure on manufacturing companies to meet sustainable goals (Dyllick and Muff, 2015). Moreover, while prior research by Covey (2002) and Greenleaf (1977) emphasises the importance of like empowerment in the sustainable success of large global organisations, or the role of modelling to influence employees' SL behaviours (Van Deirendonck, 2011; Chiniara and Bentein, 2016), the underlying processes linking SL to systemic/ organisational outcomes like CS remain largely understudied (Kantabutra and Ketprapakorn, 2020; Rodrigues and Franco, 2019; Eva et al., 2029; Knight and Paterson, 2018; Morsing and Oswald, 2009).

Being a manufacturing further strengthens Company X suitability as a case study. This sector faces more pressure to contribute towards sustainable goals due to stricter regulations and public awareness (Dyllick and Muff, 2015; Giret et al., 2015). Miller and Parker (2013) stated that international organisations are succeeding by leading with a purpose that goes beyond profit, benefiting both companies and wider communities. It would be valuable to understand how the SSL framework is used as a process towards achieving CS. Furthermore, according to Giret et al. (2015) due to the nature of their operations, managers within the manufacturing

companies were found to maintain close relationships with employees to ensure efficiency and adherence to regulations, and the employees work closely together to ensure task accomplishment. This would enable deeper insights on how ST's emphasis on interconnectedness influence SL behaviour such as empowerment and community-building (Spears, 2010; Senge, 2006). Thus, Company X offers an exemplary case from which to advance theoretical and practical insights into how ST informs the long-term implementation of SL practices and, in turn, how these practices drive corporate sustainability.

In relations to individual participants selection, the research sought to involve leaders from multiple management- levels- senior leaders (managing directors), middle-level leaders (general and regional managers) and lower-level leaders (department and divisions managers)- and their subordinates across different departments (sales, HR, customer services, E-commerce, compliance, Marketing, R&D, operations, supply chain and logistics); and country bases (US, UK and Europe), generating a robust varied sample. Several measures were taken to ensure that such variation was being achieved and to ensure a high response rate. For example, early correspondence with potential participants to ensure that some employees are randomly amongst the subordinates of the same manager and that others work in different teams under different managers. Also, that the managers themselves work at different managerial levels, which enabled a more focused, progressive and varied data collection strategy.

### **3.4.3. Data collection**

One of the strengths of a case study is that it *“uniquely comprises an all-encompassing mode of inquiry, with its own logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis”* (Yin, 2018, p.39). This technique is known as triangulation- a practice in which researchers use multiple types and sources of data, variant methods of collection, as well as various theoretical frames (Tracy, 2013). It promotes a broader understanding of the

phenomenon under study, which adds richness and depth to the research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Since this research aims to explore the implementation of SL from an ST lens and in large complex context, it was integral to get input from multiple sources, to allow rich varied insights and to cross-check the validity of the data obtained. Data was collected using both secondary and primary research, which helped to ensure that the actual case study reflected both significant theoretical issues and practices relevant to real-world cases (Yin, 2018).

The data gathered from the different sources was used to establish an understanding of participants description of leadership' behaviours, including the underlying processes through which ST enhances the long-term implementation of SL practices. Ultimately proposing a framework for “servant-systems leadership” applicable to global organisations navigating the complex challenges of balancing people and systemic efficiency like in the context of CS.

#### **3.4.3.1. First stage: Secondary data**

This study adopts a theoretically driven analysis of SL implementation, complemented with the elaboration of empirical data, focusing on the interplay between the themes emerging from participants' accounts relating to SL, ST and CS in the organisation. In addition to a thorough literature review of related theories, documentary analysis was also conducted on the organisation's website, financial and sustainability reports (ESG), documents provided by the HR manager, the SL book and articles written by the CEO, and relevant media news.

Documents provide supplementary data in support of triangulation (Lee and Lings, 2008.), as a means of verifying findings obtained from both leaders/ followers' interviews and of tracking variance and development in servant-leadership and sustainability-related practices. Information contained in documents also contributed to the development of the interview questions, as it helped to grasp an overview of the company's profile to better interpret the findings and to create a comfortable atmosphere during interviews. The quality of documents

can vary, and this can in a way affect the reliability and validity of the data collected (Bryman, 2012). Scholars like Gorman and Clayton (2005), Morse et al. (2002) and Klein and Myers (1999) proposed triangulation as a way of minimising such risk by cross-checking with other independent sources to verify any inconsistencies in the information gathered against findings from the interviews with managers and employees.

However, very little secondary data exists regarding the integration of servant-leadership with ST and its impact on SL's implementation in complex settings like sustainability. Therefore, empirical data are needed in a real-business context, which was used in iteration with ongoing literature and documentary reviews, so that the final framework would be informed by both prevailing theories and a fresh set of empirical data.

#### **3.4.3.2. Second Stage: Semi- Structured Interviews**

Acknowledging that there are three main types of interviews in the social sciences: structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, each having its own objective and focus (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015), semi-structured interviews were used in this study. They were the best option as they would allow respondents to express their views without being limited by preconceived types and scopes (Ary et al., 2014). Additionally, they have proved to be an effective method in gathering data in leadership studies in general (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012) and in servant-leadership research (e.g. Parris and Welty Peachey, 2013; Van-Dierendonck, 2011). Semi-structured interview questions tend to be open-ended, providing more opportunities for rich data to be generated from the professional viewpoints of the participants (Antwi and Hamza, 2015). They specifically help by suggesting explanations (i.e., the “hows” and “whys”) of key events, reflecting participants' perspectives (Dudovskiy, 2016; Creswell, 2013). Thus, they would help to answer Eva et al's. (2019) call for more qualitative research to better understand the unique contribution of SL on systemic outcomes.

According to Yin (2018), semi-structured interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most are about human affairs or actions. Such, they are more likely to tap both content and emotional levels (Tracy, 2013), which is specifically attractive to this research. This is because emotional behaviours such as empathy and love are core characteristics of SL (Silver and Martin, 2021; Spears, 2010; Laub, 1999), and the main components of sustainable behaviour (Corral-Verdugo, 2012; Schultz, 2001). Thus, tends to be best described rather than quantified for deeper understanding (Laub, 1999; Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). Furthermore, for SL conceptualisation lack a unified definition (Eva et al. 2019), which could lead to a variance in SL behaviour (Liden et al., 2008).

The nature of interviews would also allow the interviewer to pursue any additional questions that may arise from the interviewee's responses (Wilson, 2010). In contrast, structured interviews would not have allowed such flexibility due to their rigid format and unstructured interviews may lead to irrelevant information (Gill et al., 2008). However, with semi-structured interviews data is often subjective and depends on the respondents' personal experiences and meanings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). A reasonable approach to overcome this is to corroborate interview data with information from other sources through data triangulation (Yin, 2018), as applied in this research. Following the suggestions of Liden et al. (2008) to investigate SL from the perspectives of both leaders and followers, separate semi-structured interview sets were conducted with both groups, providing a richer understanding of the phenomena under study.

#### **3.4.3.3. Interview guides and administration**

Devising the interview guides was an iterative process which required consideration of the type of questions that would need to be asked to fulfil the research objectives. Exploring the impact of ST on SL's implementation requires a holistic understanding of the underlying processes, thus, both interview guides needed to be designed simultaneously to complement

each-other. This means encompassing all the three concepts, the multi-levels of the organisation, and both leaders and followers' perspectives. For this, the researcher devised a different set of questions for leaders (Appendix 2) and for the followers' interviews (Appendix 3), that interconnect to get the whole picture. Accordingly, this resulted in the development of combined questions for each group drawing from SL and ST theories, to ensure each was given equal consideration in both leaders and employees' interviews, with some reference to CS. These were developed by the researcher since there is no model already available that specifically evaluates SL from a systems thinking perspective (Silva et al., 2018).

The interview questions were mainly guided by the literature and document analysis. The questions focused on SL, especially on community-building, moral authority and systems thinking, were inspired by Sipe and Frick's (2009) model. This combination of theoretical insights aimed to help spot SL behaviours as originally described by Greenleaf with their focus on the 'whole', which would help to enhance understanding of how SL and ST principles fit together and co-evolve, promoting a systematic SL approach (Tumolo, 2020; Spears and SanFacon, 2008). Specifically, to understand how the dimensions of community-building and empowerment are enacted through ST's emphasis on interconnection and feedback loops, and how do they contribute towards SL implementation in real-life context.

Leaders' questions focused on their descriptions of their leadership, whereas employees' questions focused on their perceptions of the leaders/ behaviours, exploring how and why this has influenced their perception of SL within the organisation. In so allowing for emerging themes on SL and ST behaviours, as well as the mechanisms involved to surface organically. The interviews were conducted via MS Teams, lasting 35-45 minutes with employees, and 40-70 minutes with leaders, and were recorded via audiotape and note-taking with interviewees' permission. A debrief was given before each interview to give opportunity to

the respondents to ask any questions and to build a friendly comfortable atmosphere that made participants feel more at ease to express themselves. At the end, more time was given to participants to reflect on the interview and to add anything else, while given the option of emailing the researcher for more views, inquiries, or withdrawal wishes. Prior to the interviews, all the respondents were sent the participant information sheets and consent forms set to sign and return, bespoke for to each both groups (Appendix 4 & 5).

### **3.5. Thematic Analysis**

This section will provide an overview of the step-by-step process of data analysis before presenting the results in the following chapters. Acknowledging that there are various methods of qualitative data analysis, such as ethnography, grounded theory, and discourse analysis, however, to bring together the ontological and epistemological commitments of this study with the analytical power of storytelling, thematic analysis is employed as the primary methodological tool. This approach facilitates the surfacing of patterns that emerged from participant narratives, which are then examined as description of both leadership behaviours (themes) and underlying mechanisms (elaborated processes). While themes provide a snapshot of the various ways in which SL is articulated and experienced, the processes represent the dynamic interplay of these themes within the organisational system. This distinction highlights the contribution of thematic analysis to understanding SL within organisations.

The thematic analysis begins by capturing detailed descriptions of leadership practices as provided by participants (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). These descriptions are then categorised into overarching themes that reflect common patterns and significant variations in how SL is experienced and implemented. The analysis delves further into the elaborations of the underlying processes that connect them, such as how the narratives of individual behaviours

blend into broader organisational systems. This was particularly useful in defining the recurring themes and emerging tensions that serve as a conceptual base for further theoretical elaboration, on the overall key elements that make up the Systemic Servant leadership (SSL) framework. To enhance validity, the research followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage process of conducting a thematic analysis, as outlined in Table. 4.

<b>Table. 4- Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage process to conduct a thematic analysis</b>	
<b>Phase</b>	<b>Prosses description</b>
<b>1. Familiarising oneself with the data</b>	Transcribing data; reading and re-reading, noting down initial codes
<b>2. Generating initial codes</b>	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the dataset, collating data relevant to each code
<b>3. Searching for the themes</b>	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
<b>1. Reviewing the themes</b>	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset; generate a thematic ‘map’
<b>1. Defining and naming the themes</b>	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
<b>2. Producing the report</b>	Final opportunity for analysis, selecting compelling extracts; discussion of the selected extracts; relating back to research question and literature; produce report of the analysis.

As suggested by Braun and Clarke, the analysis process was conducted iteratively so that emerging concepts are recognised in accordance with developments in the researcher’s thinking. The first phase involves the initial transcribing and reading of the data, noting down initial codes which may occur during this process, and allowing the researcher to familiarise with the data. Both the interviews and transcriptions were conducted by the researcher, which increased contextual accuracy, specifically regarding recalling participants’ attitudes towards their leaders or the organisation and familiarity with the different accents of each country which also included using French on occasion. All interview transcripts were then imported into NVivo 12 for organising and analysis.

The second phase is concerned with generating initial codes from the transcribed data. Coding is the process of organising the data into meaningful groups (Lee and Lings, 2008). It enables the researcher to understand the data, sort the data into categories, find answers to the research question and finally integrate it to form a theory (Ary et al., 2014). The researcher used open-coding (no priori codes), as they emerged from the interviews. This thematic process helped to focus the coding on the important issues in the empirical data to find some substance to help develop the theory of Systemic Servant accordingly (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Initially, coding was conducted broadly on a computer generating “as many potential patterns as possible” with tables and colour coding, which allowed the researcher to fully immerse with the data and increased early detection of patterns based on their frequency (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89). It helped to distinguish whether individual-level or organisational-level concepts were being discussed and to explore whether there are any relations between the two, which flagged initial factors involved in the influence process (examples in Table.5).

Similarly, it helped discern organisational and individual behaviours according to SL, CS and ST-orientations and to determine whether there is any similarities or variance in behaviours between leaders, within leaders and employees and in employees’ behaviours, and the contexts behind it all. As new patterns emerged, the researcher continuously returned to the previously examined data from the different sources, back and forth to ensure that all the relevant data has been identified.

**Table 5. Examples of initial open-coding**

Interviews extracts	Codes	Codes
	Individual	Organisational
<p><b>Leaders</b></p> <p>Our culture is based around this statement- imagine a place where you go work every day, you make a contribution to something bigger than yourself, you are protected and set free by a compelling set of values, and you go home happy. This is important as I believe that passionate and purpose driven people guided by values create amazing outcomes ....</p> <p>It's about creating a safe working environment and that needs a culture with many ingredients a people-first mindset by the leadership; values- at the company we have 6 strong values, transparency and a purpose and clear goals for the organisation -; learning moments that reduce fear- one of the biggest demotivators is fear. Why do we need an organisation where failure is feared?! So we say we do not make mistakes we have learning moments, which we define as a positive or negative outcome at any situation that needs to be openly and freely shared to benefit all people; then we have, belonging, acceptance and connectedness, and this is where the 'whole' tribal culture come into play, it creates security, support and inclusion amongst people of the tribe ( all the workers managers) and finally you need to be caring for the people, care of them, hold them accountable, they need to feel responsible for what they do.</p> <p>Leaders are committed to help others to succeed and develop. We don't have managers in the organisation, we have coaches- you report to your coach, a great coach builds trust, adds value to the player and helps the player to win, and gets As and gives feedback on what to improve.</p> <p>It [culture] was influenced by servant leadership, and saying you are a servant leader is a good start but it's your behaviour that makes it real for people. I am convinced that our job is around serving people.... Behaviour plus consistency.</p> <p>Needs to have a balance of being tough minded and a kinder hearted, always in servant leader mode, expected to be Competent, connected with emotional intelligence, they allow learning moments, give feedback, have a heart of gold and backbone of steel, they are champion of hope, they do what they say they are going to do, and most importantly their empathy eats their ego not the round way.</p>	<p>Developing others</p> <p>Committed to others success.</p> <p>People-first mindset</p> <p>Modelling values</p> <p>Caring</p> <p>Shared/ distributed leadership</p> <p>Connected/ 'Whole' mindset</p> <p>Servant-leader behaviour</p> <p>listen to/ feedback.</p> <p>Supportive</p> <p>Consistency</p> <p>Collaborative</p>	<p>Learning moments/ mistakes</p> <p>Trainings</p> <p>Purpose- driven/ CS oriented culture</p> <p>Values- driven</p> <p>safe working environment</p> <p>openly and freely shared ideas</p> <p>Whole/ holistic approach</p> <p>Serving-other oriented</p> <p>Communication clear goals/</p> <p>Inside community</p> <p>Collaboration</p>
<p><b>Employees</b></p> <p>They [managers] listen to all ideas and feedback and take them on board. They work collaboratively with their team instead of just giving directions.</p> <p>My manager is very supportive and always has time for me. Is keen to help me progress. They are very supportive and open to ideas.</p> <p>My manager is empathetic, and I feel listened to.</p> <p>They are very supportive and have put me forward for training courses.</p> <p>They always communicate what is going on and they ask for ideas and suggestions.</p> <p>I feel confident to make decisions by myself. I am given the ownership and trust to make decisions. With difficult situations I usually decide on a solution and then ask advice from my manager.</p>		

The third phase is concerned with grouping similar codes together into relevant themes. At this stage codes were imported into NVivo12 and organised under initial codes, according to individual or organisational-level contexts, and within colour stickers blue and red were assigned to both leaders and followers' groups respectively to distinguish both perspectives

of the same concept. Codes were then collated in accordance with their similarities into potential themes. Several codes were grouped in a single theme as they presented similarities and overlaps from both leaders and employees' views, whereas other codes became themes with some other codes incorporated into them, such as with 'Coaching and Supporting' theme.

The fourth phase is concerned with refining and defining these themes so that they "cohere together meaningfully" while being distinct (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 91), thus- *generating a thematic map*. At this stage the 58 themes were reduced and categorised into individual aspect, organisational aspect and overall connecting aspects, providing an insightful dataset. The iterative process adopted allowed constant refinement of these themes through an overview of the insights gathered from both leaders' and employees' perspectives and was continued until thematic saturation. This resulted in the first draft of the Systemic SL key ingredients which represent an integrated overview of the insights generated from the research.

The fifth stage is concerned with defining and naming the themes once a satisfactory thematic map was generated and data saturation has been achieved through the iterative process. At this stage the themes were defined to capture their essence, ensuring that all themes and processes are interrelated to represent an overview of the research findings. Sub-themes that emerged from the participants' description of behaviours, helped to highlight the underlying mechanisms associated with their perceived enactment. These then were collated together on a similarity-basis to capture the essence of the process used for further theoretical elaboration. The same iterative thematic process was conducted for the other 5 behavioural themes and the other three elaborated processes, which will be fully discussed in the next chapters. Inconsistencies between the three datasets and the accounted critics as per participants helped to flag the tensions and limitations associated with SL perceived enactment, which helped to

identify the potential barriers for SL's systemic implementation, setting grounds for further theoretical elaboration on SSL dimensions, processes, contingent conditions to be met and outcomes or tensions engendered if met/ not met.

Once the thematic mapping was completed and deemed comprehensive and offered a theoretically sound interpretation of all the data (literature, documents and interviews), the sixth stage began. A thorough evaluation was conducted of the findings, which enabled to present them in a critical manner, highlighting the unique contribution of the research both academic and practical within servant-leadership and ST fields, stretching to sustainability management. This was done in two steps: first by producing a report as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) that accounts the analysis journey, which will be covered in the next chapters through extracts from interviews and organisational documents, followed by an integrated discussion. The second step is to conclude the findings by presenting the Systemic Servant leadership framework and its key ingredients (discussed in chapter 6).

### **3.6. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues in social research usually involve four key areas: whether informed consent has been given, whether the research may cause an invasion of privacy and confidentiality, any harm to participants, and if deception is involved (Bryman, 2012, p.130). The focus of the questions was mainly on organisational processes and the influence on individual behaviour rather than on the personal lives of the respondents, which meant that physical or emotional harm to participants was unlikely. The nature of the research also meant that it was unnecessary to intentionally deceive the participants about the research purpose in any way. To ensure transparency, two different sets of information sheets and consent forms were sent to both leaders (Appendix. 4) and followers (Appendix. 5) to ensure informed and signed consent was gained from each before the interviews. These documents gave detailed

information about the purpose of the research and the opportunity to email the researcher with any further questions before taking part. They also provided details on the processes relating to safeguarding participants' confidentiality and how the data collected would be used, securely stored, and accessed only by the researcher and destroyed once the project was completed. Their right, period and ways to withdraw from the research were also well explained. Participants were reassured that their identity would be protected through a pseudonym code and that any specific details that could easily enable to identify them were removed, including paraphrasing of identifiable public texts. These processes not only were essential to ensure research ethics but making them explicit allowed participants to feel at ease to express their views which increased the likelihood of generating richer and valuable data. Ethical approval has been gained and adhered to throughout the research.

### **3.7. Research Rigour**

Establishing research rigour and quality is important as without, research loses its utility (Morse et al., 2002). Qualitative research is often established to be rigorous if it is trustworthy, reliable and valid (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2003). Although various criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research were suggested by other authors (e.g., Tracy, 2013), the criteria introduced by Guba and Lincoln (1989) were adopted in this study, as they are widely accepted and offer more pragmatic choices to assess the validity and trustworthiness of the research (Nowell et al., 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1989) advocate the use of the 'trustworthiness' standard for the quality of qualitative studies, which also endorse the belief that there can be more than one valid account of social phenomena. Their emphasis on trustworthiness conforms with the research purpose and its interpretivism philosophy of multiple valid interpretations of social concepts. The 'trustworthiness' standard is based on meeting four key criteria:

**-Credibility-** addresses the fit between respondents' views and the researcher's interpretations of them and whether the judgments made by the researcher can be trusted (Tobin and Begley, 2004; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The authors suggested various strategies to address credibility including persistent observation, data collection triangulation, and peer reviews that provide an external check on the research process.

**-Transferability-** refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), these can be achieved through thick description, purposive sampling and reflexivity. They assert that the researcher is responsible for providing thick descriptions so that those who seek to transfer the findings can judge transferability.

**-Dependability-** it involves ensuring that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin and Begley, 2004). Dependability is attainable through credibility, triangulation, splitting data and duplicating the analysis (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

**-Confirmability-** it addresses establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1986) and ensuring that their "personal values or theoretical inclinations" do not "sway the conduct of the research" (Bryman 2012, p.392). Triangulation and peer debriefing were recommended as strategies to achieve this (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

Criticisms have been received regarding the ability of meeting each of the four criteria (Bryman, 2012), as such, efforts were made to apply Guba and Lincoln's (1989) recommended strategies to minimise these concerns when possible. For instance, data triangulation from multiple sources and perspectives involving both followers and employees on multi-levels and across various departments and country-bases was used to improve *credibility*, providing multiple measures of the same phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Research

found that those case studies using multiple sources of evidence were rated more highly, in terms of their overall quality construct validity and rigour than those that relied on only single sources of information (Tracy, 2013). Also, parts of the research were presented to peers and in a symposium, along with regular discussions with the supervisory team. This enabled to evaluate whether the researcher has allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations to sway the conduct of the research (Bryman, 2012), which in turn would enhance the *confirmability* of the study. To improve *dependability*, the research clearly demonstrated and justified the reasons for the theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study, and has demonstrated a detailed data-gathering process which was well documented within the research. As for *transferability*, efforts were made to produce ‘rich accounts of the details’ of the phenomena being studied (SL/CS/ST) and of the research findings to enable others to make ‘judgements about the possible transferability of findings’ to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Data were garnered from a significant sized and fragmented sample (*different positions, gender, departments and county-bases*) of 51 individuals, using the recommended purposive sampling (Guba and Lincoln, 1989), until data saturation was reached. It encompassed both leaders and employees, different genders, management levels, departments, and regions/countries, which not only allowed to gain richer insights which enhanced credibility, but it increased the scope of the research ability to be transferred to other contexts.

Although, as in any study, despite all efforts made to enhance research quality and rigour, these cannot always be guaranteed. However, these limitations can be venues for future research directions which still in a way contribute to knowledge.

### **3.8. Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of the philosophies and methodology employed in this research, along with critical justifications for the choice of each according to their suitability in satisfying the research aims. Qualitative research was used to gain deeper insights from different perspectives and to answer the increasing calls from scholars for more qualitative studies in that respect. Semi-structured interviews were used for that purpose in addition to organisational and other related public documents. The chapter has also covered the case study context, the participants' information and selection and under which criteria. The iterative thematic analysis journey was described in 6-stages, followed by the ethical considerations and the measures taken to enhance the research validity and rigour. The findings and discussion are presented next in three chapters, Chapter 4 presents the accounted SL behavioural themes emerging from participants' descriptions, and Chapter 5 covers the processes elaborated from how the themes come together in the organisation. Chapter 6 presents the integrated elements and perspectives of the overall research that led to developing the SSL conceptual framework, and so, satisfying the research questions and objectives.

# *Findings & Discussion*

## *Background of the Analysis*

This section presents the main findings from both the leaders and followers' interviews, cross-checked with the company documentary analysis. Understanding individuals' perception and experiences of SL practices, in contrast with organisational narratives, allows to assess alignment and contradictions patterns as they emerge from the data. These helped to fulfil the objectives 1-4 of the research and will be presented in two parts- Chapter 4 (part1) and Chapter 5 (part 2) respectively. Together they assist to answering the overarching research question:

*What are the key ingredients for the successful and sustained systemic implementation of servant-leadership in an international organisation, and how does it contribute to advancing corporate sustainability?*

The aim is to delve into the complexities, dynamics and potential tensions, as well as the underlying mechanisms, reflected through a systems thinking lens, in how company X and its leaders describe their SL approaches and how in turn employees perceive and describe them. Interpreting participants' accounts from an ST perspective, involves looking for evidence of systemic features in leaders' SL approach. Table (6) outlines the key conceptual principles underpinning this analysis.

**Table 6- Key Conceptual Principles of SL and ST underpinning this research analysis**

<b>Servant Leadership</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Systems Thinking</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Sources</b>
<b>Empathy</b>	Understanding and sharing others' emotions and perspectives.	<b>Holistic Perspective</b>	Analysing problems as interconnected components of a larger system.	SL: Greenleaf (1977); ST: Williamo et al., 2017
<b>Awareness</b>	Self- and organisational consciousness of strengths, weaknesses, and dynamics.	<b>Interdependencies</b>	Recognising how system components influence one another.	SL: Spears (2010); ST: Senge (1990)
<b>Ethical Values</b>	Prioritising integrity, fairness, and transparency in actions.	<b>Feedback Loops</b>	Assessing how system outputs affect future inputs and behaviours.	SL: van Dierendonck (2011); ST: Meadows (2008)
<b>Sharing Power</b>	Empowering others through delegation and collaborative decision-making.	<b>Long-Term Thinking</b>	Balancing immediate outcomes with sustainable, future-focused solutions.	SL: Sendjaya (2008); ST: Sipe and Frick (2009)
<b>Commitment to Growth</b>	Fostering personal and professional development of individuals.	<b>Contextual Awareness</b>	Understanding system elements within their broader environmental,	SL: Barbuto and Wheeler (2006); ST: Checkland (2012)

This framework enables the interpretation of participants' accounts of key SL elements through the lens of systems thinking, by analysing patterns such as of awareness of the interdependencies, dynamics and needs of broader stakeholders within one integrated

ecosystem- even if the term "systems thinking" is not explicitly used. Frequent references to concepts such as, *stakeholders, situational adaptability, context, feedback, the wider picture, the common good, community, systems and processes*, provide sufficient ground for this interpretation. In particular, participants' accounts of adaptability and contextual awareness- understood not just as situational responses- would help to identify where an ST-informed intervention might be valuable.

While exploring the synergistic potential of SL and ST, the analysis will retain a critical perspective. Issues such as balancing individual service with systemic needs and the potential for a normative control system will be considered (*how leadership discourse might subtly shape employee behaviour and align individuals with organisational objectives*). This analysis helped towards answering the 3 sub- questions and is presented in two parts- Chapter 4 (part1) and Chapter 5 (part 2), under Accounted Behavioural 'Themes' and theoretically elaborated 'processes', respectively. This will contribute to the overall development of the Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) framework, presented in Chapter 6.

# Chapter 4- Part 1: The Accounts of Behaviours

## 4. Introduction:

This chapter presents a critical analysis of leader and followers accounts concerning servant-leadership practices from a systems thinking lens, within an exemplary organisational setting. Central to this analysis is a focus on leaders' accounted of behaviour- their subjective interpretations, justifications, and framing— rather than making definitive claims about their actual behaviours. This should contribute to that part of the SSL framework development, which represents an integrated overview of- 1) the accounted leadership behaviour as described by the company, 2) the accounted leaders' behaviour as described by the leaders, 3) the accounted leaders' behaviour as perceived and described by the employees. This approach remains vital for understanding how concepts like SL, ST and even CS are understood, integrated, and enacted in practice. It helped to map out the consistent emerging themes from participants narratives of leadership behaviours rather than actual observed behaviours.

Six key themes of accounted leaders' behaviours emerged from the data, namely: *1.Aligning Values, 2.Support and Coaching, 3.Partnering Leadership 4. Situational Adaptability, 5. Building Community, and 6. Expanding Awareness.*

In so, assisting in addressing sub-question 1: *What key elements characterise the long-term practical enactment of servant-leadership in the exemplary international organisation?"*

The analysis has also enabled the surfacing of sub-themes that facilitate each of these behavioural themes, which will be theoretically elaborated and presented in Chapter 5.

## 4.1 Theme 1: Aligning Values

The first significant theme to emerge was the importance that both groups and the organisation place on the company's culture and the 'aligned' values within the organisation.

### *4.1.1. Content analysis- "accounts of behaviour as described in company's public documents"*

Document analysis highlighted that Company X identifies as a values-driven organisation, putting values at the centre of all their decisions (ESG, 2022, p.6). The company views ethical conduct as an important part of its values, reflecting their commitment to integrity (p.62). Calling their workforce 'the tribe' and the employees/ leaders 'tribe members' is also part of the company's culture, reflecting a clan-like community of self-sustaining, diverse, passionate, and values-aligned individuals (2022, p.26). Notably, the term consistently being used when describing values is "aligned" rather than "shared," which signals a deliberate account of how values are integrated throughout the organisation. The company presents its accounts of behaviour as grounded in a set of six interrelated values, that guide actions across economic, environmental, and social dimensions; as paraphrased below, while preserving the meaning (ESG, 2022, p.5):

- *Acting with integrity by serving our community and stakeholders based on the given situation and context.*
- *Building lasting positive experiences and trust in every interaction with our community and stakeholders.*
- *Continuously improving by encouraging ideas and solutions that drive progress and create economic, environmental, and social benefits.*
- *Thriving collectively while excelling individually- personal success should align with*

*and contribute to the overall team's achievements.*

- *Acting with passion- recognising our influence and taking responsibility for the effects of our decisions.*
- *Ensuring long-term financial stability- generating and safeguarding economic value for the future of our community and stakeholders.*

The six values were presented as ‘priority’ ranked, whereby together, collectively drive toward Value #1 (serving stakeholders), and the success of the *whole* organisation. They describe their approach as holistic by being true to their values in governing and managing the environmental, social, and the economic aspects of their business (ESG, 2020, p.5). This holistic approach reflects both SL and ST’s focus on the whole. The interconnectedness between values is emphasised by positioning serving as the foundation for building relations, continuous improvement, individual and collective success, and long-term financial stability (ESG, 2020, p7). However, by ranking company’s values as a defined set, although well communicated, they appear to be inevitable, creating risks that employees may perform alignment in compliance, rather than genuinely internalising them.

The company frames SL as deeply embedded in their culture through processes designed to align individual behaviours with practices such as ‘accountability’ and working together to ‘benefit communities’. It employs a strict recruitment process to screen for values alignment, requiring applicants to self-select based on resonance with stated values before moving forward with the application process (ESG, 2020, p.22). Post-hiring, all employees and leaders are introduced to SL concepts through a book co-authored by the CEO- a practice that has been institutionalised as a cultural norm for over 25 years. Additional SL trainings are mandatory for all leaders and employees to align on SL practices, working together to benefit the organisation and wider communities (ESG, 2020, p.38). Such proactive recruitment and

training system is said to help create a shared cultural baseline, however, could it be excluding candidates, or marginalising groups with divergent perspectives? Such practice would not only go against SL's premise of acceptance and inclusivity claimed by the company but can lead to restricting dissent and innovative sustainable solutions, if not well managed.

The company holds leaders responsible for embedding SL values daily, not only via the training sessions, but by clearly communicating them through one-to-one meetings with employees to ensure continuous alignment. Quarterly performance reviews systems were said to be used to discuss employees' concerns, needs and developments, as well as for employees to demonstrate how they have lived the company's values in the last three months (ESG, 2020, p.38). Additionally, the company employs '*Risk Management*' assessments that ensure ethical behaviours and value alignment throughout the company (ESG, 2020, p.63). Such strong ideological alignment is described as a way to create a harmonious environment, reducing conflicts and mitigating ad-hoc decision-making (p.63). These processes are described as designed to ensure that leaders and followers' behaviours reflect a commitment to SL practices, where individual success is mainly defined through contributing to the success of their teams and the organisation as whole (Value#2), while serving all stakeholders (ESG, 2020, p.4).

Overall, the organisation's accounts show a deliberate and structured approach to fostering a values-based culture rooted in SL, presented in the portrayal of their described holistic approach. However, while these appear to drive positive, integrated outcomes, critical questions remain on whether SL companies can draw a line between a top-down leadership that shapes employees' behaviours, and an equitable power dynamic approach that allows room for self-identity? The balance between fostering a truly empowering environment and

inadvertently enforcing conformity is critical and requires ongoing attention. Further analysis of leaders and employees' accounts prove essential to get a much bigger picture. For instance, more clarity is needed on how systemic interdependencies and strategies are practically managed, such as in resolving conflicts between individual growth and collective success, to better explore ST's necessity to SL, in practice.

#### ***4.1.2. Leadership interviews- "accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders"***

Leaders frequently emphasised the importance of value with the consistent use of "aligned" term, showing a deliberate effort to create a common identity across diverse regions, e.g., :  
*"we have people who stay here for so long because they believe in that idea of doing the right thing and they feel an alignment with company's values"* (05.SL.NL). The CEO and founder of the company's culture for the past 25 years, referred to this notion, during the interview, as people who "operate according to our values", adding that values were *"influenced by the style of servant-leadership"* (09.CEO.US). This was further confirmed by most leaders, highlighting that SL is practiced uniformly across regions throughout the company globally:  
*"servant-leadership is the common philosophy throughout our organisation. So, whether you're in Asia, Europe, the Americas, it would be servant-leadership style"* (11.SL.US).

These accounts suggest that the organisation's culture is deeply rooted in a shared belief system (SL) that is believed to enhance employee retention and commitment and fostering a cohesive organisational culture. Most leaders emphasised their crucial role in communicating and embedding SL values, describing a comprehensive approach for consistent reinforcement. The CEO stressed that leaders must *"continually work at embedding the importance of the values in the organisation, making sure that you do it day after day... when we have that one-on-one time appraisal review, we ask our tribe members to share how they've lived our values in the last 90 days"* (09.CEO.US). SL training also plays a central

role in this process: *“servant leadership is the philosophy that we teach and try to embed, not just informally or formally through training, but also in our performance management systems”* (01.SL.US).

Additionally, the ideas that: *“Setting the example is critically bringing them to life, so we have to live the value”* (13.LL.UK) and *“saying you're a servant leader is a good start, but it's your behaviour that makes it real for people”* (11.SL.US), reinforce leaders' responsibility for consistently modelling these values. This approach was described as creating an opportunity to inspire and influence employees' behaviours by: *“showing people how the style of servant-leadership is making a positive difference in the lives of the people”* (09.CEO.US). When probing if this applies to everyone, many leaders explained that it depends on the individual pre-disposition: *“I think people are born with a propensity for servant-leadership, that they adopt it once they hear about it. But some people, if they don't have the preference, they're never going to be”* (12.ML.UK). Another leader referred to this 'propensity for servant-leadership' in terms of having similar values: *“We [company] have a philosophy that people generally are trying to do a good job and they're putting forth their best efforts because their values are aligned between employees and the company's stated values”* (11.SL.US). As such, this rigid alignment approach is perceived by leaders to ensure continuous values adherence, motivate employees and positively impact their engagement and performance ('best effort').

However, the strong focus on having values that are strictly “aligned” may risk excluding individuals whose perspectives differ from the established norm, potentially limiting diversity in thought and creating a highly homogenised workforce. Leaders did acknowledge employees leaving due to “misalignment,” which justifies the company's commitment to recruiting individuals who are already aligned with its values, to minimise this risk: *“we've*

*had people that unfortunately have left in a very short space of time because they may not have the same mentality or the same way of working as company X” (03.LL.UK).*

Acknowledging these issues is necessary to enhance SL applicability by recognising the contexts when SL is weak and exploring alternative solutions. In practice, Company X addresses these issues by recruiting employees with aligned values from the start through a strict selection process (01.SL.US). Then once recruited, SL training is offered to everyone along with the CEO’s SL book, to further reinforce SL-values adherence throughout. This is followed by continuous communications and monitoring reviews. Leaders attribute long-term success to this cultural cohesion, stating: *“Staying close to our tribal culture and values was important to succeed... even in the past tough years we still were a very profitable business”* (05.SL.NL); which in turn, was described as benefiting the wider stakeholders: *“In our sustainability journey, the wide definition and not only about the environment, what drives us is that we have our company X values”* (20.LL.UK). However, while this approach enhances cultural fit, it may be excluding candidates who could adapt but lack predefined traits or failed to better showcase theirs.

Overall, the leaders’ accounts provide a robust narrative of how servant-leadership is integrated into the company’s culture through alignment, modelling, and ongoing reinforcement. The positive aspects include strong employee retention, a unified global culture, and clear links between SL and broader CS initiatives. However, the reliance on rigid alignment and formal appraisal structures, along with the emphasis on a natural predisposition towards SL, raises concerns about potential conformity, homogeneity and exclusion of diverse perspectives. If the process of alignment becomes too rigid, it might lead to viewing SL practices as a form of normative control rather than a genuine effort to empower and engage employees (Kunda, 1992). Authentic transformation requires addressing these structural challenges to avoid stifling innovation or critical views. Analysing

employees' side of the story is thus necessary to illuminate deeper issues that could emerge from such a strict alignment process.

#### ***4.1.3. Employee interviews- "accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers"***

Employees' interviews reveal a strong and consistent identification with the company's values, indicating that they are well perceived by employees and seen through the same lens. Their accounts echo leaders' narratives regarding the importance of alignment as central to recruitment, retention, and motivation: "*one other thing that attracted me to joining the company was the values because they were very aligned with mine*" (43.EM.SP); "*values are something that is embedded in within the organisation. I wouldn't have got Job at company X if I didn't see that*" (19.EM.IR). They reinforce the shared understanding of what the company stands for, by using similar wordings to the leaders: "*we all believe in what it is that the company stands for and the company values much align with our core values*" (06.EM.UK); "*people [employees] bought into that idea of doing the right thing and feel an alignment with company's values*" (14.EM.UK).

This strong shared language suggests that the company's SL values are well ingrained, serving as a strong source of identity and commitment, reinforcing leaders' claims of a cohesive SL culture. As found above, leaders perceived this to influence employees' mindset and related behaviours, by consistently embedding the values- constantly communicating, modelling and reviewing them: "*We are constantly reminded of these in our everyday working life, in our appraisals reviews, and even in our offices, they are on the walls*" (32.EM.LX); "*the appraisal gives us an opportunity to evaluate whether we have indeed lived our company values in our working life*" (08.EM.UK). Many other similar accounts point to the importance of: structured communication "*They [leaders] communicate the pattern well*" (31.EM.NL), training: "*we also have internal servant-leadership training plus*

*the CEO book. Everybody receives those when they start*” (36.EM.BL), and performance reviews to monitor: *“whether we [employees] have indeed lived our company values”* (08.EM.UK), as processes to embed and align SL values and behaviours throughout the company.

Leaders’ focus on modelling related behaviours is clearly noted by employees: *“the senior leadership set the example and make it kind of appealing for everybody else to sort of follow the values, I think that makes a difference”* (14.EM.UK). These accounts indicate that leaders’ proactive salient behaviour provides a source of influence and motivation among followers (*‘makes a difference’*). This was further noticed throughout the interviews with employees expressing being inspired and motivated by their leaders: *“[manager] is an excellent role model...Seeing how intentional [manager] is to check in on everyone on such a personal level inspires me to do the same”*(41.EM.FR); *“Working in the tribal culture has inspired me to be a more interactive member of the team, and EMEA team and my community”* (17.EM.UK). This last statement shows that the leaders’ influence on followers extends beyond the organisation, inspiring them to be better members individually, within their teams and in their community. This is further reflected in the similarities between the company, leaders and followers’ views regarding the importance of their aligned values in serving the wider stakeholders, as evidenced by this employee: *“we value doing the right thing. So that's within our company itself and with all stakeholders and aspects of our business”* (15.EM.UK).

Many other employees also linked SL values with their increased personal commitment to CS, inspired by their leaders: *“CEO inspires me the most, he encourages us to give back to our community and also gives back himself”* (02.EM.US); *“I think differently working with my company. I think, it does help me in my community”* (19.EM.IR). The extent of influence on employees’ mindset (*thinking differently working with the company*) can further be noticed

through the shared language that many use in describing their own inspirations towards sustainability, such as: “*I try to make positive choices for the environment... to leave a lasting impact*” (16.EM.NL); “*one of my personal values is that I'd just like generally to make things better than today*” (35.EM.UK). Employees attributing alignment to shared ‘*personal values*’, mirrors leaders’ belief in innate “propensity” for SL.

In sum, the employees’ accounts largely validate leaders’ narratives that the company’s SL values are deeply ingrained and influential, resonating strongly with both personal and organisational group identities. They describe the effectiveness of daily reinforcement, role modelling by the leadership, and structured reviews system in promoting a cohesive, values-driven culture. However, consideration should be given to the fact that employees’ self-reports of alignment (“*values align with my core values*”) may reflect self-selection bias (pre-recruitment filtering) or indoctrination (through training/constant reinforcement). Employees consistently note that their core values match those of the company, expressing genuine pride in community impact, which suggest authentic engagement. This alignment is clearly viewed by participants as a benefit in recruiting and retaining staff. However, it may also risk to inadvertently marginalise those with different perspectives or pre-dispositions.

Employees’ use of company-shared language (e.g., “*make things better than today*”) suggests strong internalisation of company’s identity and culture, but also raises questions about critical engagement and dissent (largely absent in employee accounts). This may signal a potential for normative control, where employees internalise organisational values as personal identity (Kunda, 1992). As a result, ironically, the same structured processes designed to foster cohesion might also be masking a covert enforcement or/and promoting a surface-level compliance.

## 4.2. Theme 2- Coaching and Support

The second theme to emerge was the significance all data groups attributed to support and learning

### *4.2.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents”*

A defining feature of Company X’s organisational culture, as depicted in corporate documents, is the framing of leaders as ‘coaches’ rather than traditional managers. According to the company, leaders as coaches, are responsible for mentoring and guiding employees by providing both personal and developmental support (ESG, 2020, p.19). However, on the same time, employees are expected to drive their own career growth, with leaders positioned as supportive rather than directive figures (ESG, 2022, p.30). This reflects servant-leadership principles, where leaders focus on follower growth.

This focus is described in the company’s documents as a reciprocal process that contributes to both individual and organisational success. The company highlights that its objectives would not have been achieved without the collective commitment of employees to Company’s X organisational values (ESG, 2022, p.18). Corporate documents present formal mechanisms that institutionalise this emphasis, through their coaching system, including quarterly one-to-one reviews as a process for monitoring functional competency, goal achievement checklist, values demonstration, and promoting personal/ professional advancements opportunities.

The organisation frames learning as a fundamental component of both leaders and followers’ growth and employee engagement, stating that investments in training enhance workforce motivation and increase prospects for success (ESG, 2020, p.69). The coaching process starts with the teaching of SL principles, described as a unifying framework that fosters SL values and practices alignment across global teams, enabling them to speak the same language as

they work together in benefiting their communities (ESG, 2022, p.58). This emphasis on shared language and mindset is extended beyond employees to external stakeholders (e.g., youth programs, nonprofits), who are also invited to participate in trainings, aiming to align on SL principles and behaviours (ESG, 2022, p.18). The company's accounts suggest that this not only helped in supporting individual growth but also in contributing to broader societal impact, by 'paying it forward' to external communities (ESG, 2022, p.18).

This reflects ST's emphasis on interconnectedness, positioning development as a tool to strengthen relationships across social, economic, and environmental systems, suggesting direct links between learning, corporate strategy, and sustainability impact. Furthermore, according to the company these growth opportunities create a safe inclusive learning environment (ESG, 2020, p.17), through its distinctive learning 'moments' system: providing space for mistakes and open discussions to foster growth through sharing experiences (ESG, 2020, p.18). These practices align with SL's focus on empowerment, where errors are treated as opportunities for improvement.

Employees are expected to take responsibility for ESG impacts, tying personal growth to sustainability outcomes (ESG, 2022, p.18). The company portrays coaching as key to enhance collective engagement and evolve their integrated ESG approach, through learning (p.10) and fostering a culture of accountability that includes long-term impacts of their business on stakeholders' well-being (ESG, 2020, p.18). Furthermore, this practice was also described as a means to developing future servant leaders which is perceived as fundamental to the company's sustainable future (ESG, 2020, p.18).

By reframing leaders as coaches and mentors, the company shows an effort to decentralise power, theoretically empowering employees. However, the formal structure of coaching, reviews, and mandatory unified SL teaching could be interpreted as reinforcing previous

concerns of normative control. The company's depiction of a "learning organisation" that instils SL principles in both employees and external stakeholders raises questions about the extent to which this process facilitates genuine autonomy versus reinforcing a prescribed organisational ideology. Thus, the tension between genuine empowerment and normative control remains a key consideration in assessing the broader implications of Company X's approach to coaching and support. Especially so, since the extent to which employees truly feel secure in acknowledging mistakes and choosing their own growth path cannot be critically examined through the company's narrative alone, requiring further insights from leaders and employees.

#### ***4.2.2. Leadership interviews- "accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders"***

In all the interviews, leaders rejected hierarchical titles by consistently framing themselves as *coaches* rather than a traditional manager: "*you don't report to a manager. You report to your coach*" (09.CEO.US). Leaders described supporting and teaching employees as integral parts of their role as servant-leaders: "*our main objective as servant-leaders is to make sure that everybody gets listened to in what they aspire to do so that people develop, grow and succeed*" (26.ML.UK). These accounts align with the company's documents, presenting a key manifestation of servant-leadership, where support is tailored to individual needs to support both their professional and personal developments. Leaders described this as an empathetic and compassionate approach that fosters a safe environment for employees' growth: "*you need to have a high level of empathy, compassion and be there for your team on a personal level... show concern for their well-being*" (01.SL.US). This aligns with SL's emphasis on holistic care for followers (Senjaya et al., 2018), which was described as '*servant-leadership in action*' (09.CEO.US). The belief is that by developing employees, they

will evolve both personally and professionally: *“as coaches we help them to achieve what they want or anything they need to evolve in their jobs, in the company”* (39.ML.IB).

In addition to listening and communication, employees' growth is also facilitated by the one-to-one reviews system which leaders describe as enabling tool to discover employees' passion and competencies: *“we review competencies and what kind of support this person will need, then we monitor how is this person is growing or learning in that course”* (04.ML.BL). This supports the idea that leaders tailor development to individual aspirations, but it also ensures employees remain within the company's coaching framework.

A recurring theme in leadership accounts was the notion of a safe learning environment where employees are given the freedom to make mistakes, similarly, referred to by all participants as a *learning moment*: *“where employees feel safe to make mistakes, learn from them and share their experiences”* (05.SL.NL). This was presented as fostering a *“connection and sense of belonging within the teams”* (09.CEO.US), which resonates with SL's emphasis on community building. This cohesion is described as being fostered through developing employees' capabilities, empowering them to achieve both their own and organisational goals: *“I'm there to support them to get their skills and the competency and the mindset to reach their development goals and the company as well”* (04.ML.BL). Such, leaders continuously linked learning and support to autonomy: *“coaching is about listening, asking open questions, showing care and respect to employees...And what you're cultivating among employees is a sense of ownership and empowerment to make things happen”* (01.SL.US). However, the coaching system, as described, occurs within rigid values-alignment mechanisms, such as mandatory training and SL materials (including the CEO book), quarterly reviews, and values adherence assessments, which may subtly be enforcing conformity (Burawoy, 1979).

Leaders further connect development to broader systemic impact: *“Our job is to create an environment where our tribe members, feel safe, fulfilled, have learned something new and contributed to something bigger than themselves”* (09.CEO.US). The belief is that growth in the workplace translates into positive societal contributions as hinted by the CEO: *“Imagine a place where you go to work every day. You are protected and set free by a compelling set of values, and you go home happy. You will make a contribution to something bigger than yourself, at home, at work, in your community”* (09.CEO.US).

Leaders also presented coaching as a ripple effect to shaping future leaders: *“Once you develop one servant-leader, you see the benefits later... Because if I can help them grow to become the best version of themselves, those leaders get inspired to help others and become servants themselves”* (18.ML.UK). The ultimate goal, as framed by this senior leader, is to create individuals who can *“go out into the world to make it a better place for all”* (05.SL.NL). This aligns with ST’s focus on long-term change and SL’s motivation to serve; however, it may also reveal an implicit expectation that employees will not only grow as individuals but will also adopt the company’s specific moral and community-focused agenda.

In sum, leaders’ accounts reinforce the idea that supporting and coaching employees is central to the company’s culture, reflecting SL and ST principles through psychological safety, and interconnection. However, while growth is framed as autonomous, it remains tightly integrated into organisational expectations. This raises the question of whether employees adopt SL principles due to genuine belief or because leaders may be reinforcing a sense of *expected alignment* with organisational strategies and values. While leaders describe a culture that encourages openness, employees may still experience pressure to perform and align with organisational norms. The extent to which employees truly feel safe in openly discussing failure or concerns without fear is still not critically addressed in leadership

narratives. The actual understanding of psychological safety within organisations is complex and requires insights into the lived experiences of the employees as described by them.

#### ***4.2.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers”***

Support was frequently mentioned as one of the most valued qualities in a leader by employees: *“I prefer to have a supportive leader to check on some things”* (32.EM.LX). It was described as central to their relationship with the leaders and involves showing care for their well-being both personally and professionally. This aligns with SL’s focus on holistic care, for instance, one middle leader described their approach as follows: *“I think that they can always, uh, come to me when they have something and that I’m always helping them to talk about it and to see what the possibilities are”* (25.ML.UK). To cross-check leaders’ claims, two of the leader’s followers were asked what strikes them the most about their leader: *“easy to discuss personal issues as well as work-related with her, I feel I am listened to”* (35.EM.UK); *“I am able to approach [leader] with any issue, personal or otherwise and you know [manager] is concerned about our [employees] well-being not just our performance”* (30.EM.UK). These employees' statements align with the leader’s account, indicating a shared perception of leadership across the team.

Conversely, while most employees feel supported, a few expressed a desire for more support *“supportive, but sometimes not enough time together, would do with a bit more coaching”* (28.EM.UK); *“I Would like more input and coaching, I’m sure that there’s room to do more, but I think some of that comes from me as well as my manager”* (06.EM.UK). The disparity may stem from variations in leadership behaviour, as noted by this leader: *“it’s my leader’s job to support and coach them, and I’m not saying that’s everybody in the company, but at*

*least for my part it is*” (05.SL.NL). Such inconsistency in leaders’ approach, needs to be further analysed as it can also suggest that SL practices may be unevenly applied across certain teams or regions, undermining systemic cohesion. Although, not widespread, it needs to be addressed as potentially the numbers may be higher than presented, which will be further discussed in theme 4.

Employee’s acknowledgement of their responsibility for their personal growth (06.EM.UK), match the leaders’ claim that employees are first and foremost accountable for their own development (11.SL.US). This aligns with SL’s empowerment focus, but may be subjected to systemic barriers, such as access to training, deprivileging those with less supportive leaders (28.EM.UK; 06.EM.UK) or excluding others from strategic communication (20.LL.UK; 40.EM.FR; 19.EM.IR). Employees also confirmed that one-to-one reviews were in place and perceived them positively in relation to fostering dialogue and growth: *“We have one-to-one reviews. And that's an opportunity to raise any issues, um, to talk about things I'd like to do, challenges I've had, and we discuss things then and he gives me feedback on things”* (21.EM.NL). Another employee who became a manager shared their experience regarding the role of their manager in their career progression: *“without my manager, I wouldn't have thought about going for the leadership [position X]”* (03.LL.UK). This reflects the statements of leaders and the company, that they aim to build future servant-leaders. However, these reviews may still be subtly used to enforce alignment with company values, and so, caution is needed to ensure such development mechanisms do not also serve as control tools.

Many employees also reported feeling encouraged by their leaders to pursue training and having the freedom to choose their own developmental paths: *“Listening and taking an interest in what my aspirations are, and supporting me with like, the development activities I*

*choose to keep learning*” (41.EM.FR). This supports leaders’ statements that developing employees includes listening to their needs (see 26.ML.UK, previous section), however still risks privileging teams over others with less supportive leaders.

Another critical element of perceived support was described as having the space to make mistakes without fear, which employees valued: *“A big thing within the company is our learning moment, one of the reasons I wanted to join Company X”* (48.EM.NL). This fix-adjust-learn approach reflects ST’s emphasis on adaptive systems, however, the framing of room for mistakes within strict values adherence systems (e.g., reviews, annual values assessment) risks overestimating the degree to which employees truly feel safe in admitting mistakes by scrutinising non-aligned behaviours.

Overall, employees indicated that being given support, learning and growth opportunities, autonomy, and room for mistakes, made them feel empowered: *“I’ve never had that before in previous jobs, um, the style of management has not been so good, and I feel like that’s had limitations on my ability to grow within the company”* (19.EM.IR). In turn, employees stated that this made them feel motivated, valued, engaged and dedicated to the company: *“my manager has been extremely supportive, listening, giving me time off when needed and understanding when I can’t work. In return I am dedicated and work very hard”* (08.EM.UK).

Additionally, coaching and support were perceived as enhancing collaboration, communication and feedback, to achieve both teams and organisational objectives.

Employees noted that such practices build trust and a safe learning environment where they are supported not only to achieve the company’s goals but theirs as well: *“I feel supported by my manager to pursue my own development goals as well as goals by the company”* (19.EM.IR); *“We have one-to-one meetings regularly, explains about decisions and goals that we need to and ask for suggestions”* (28.EM.UK).

These leadership behaviours were also described by employees as having a positive impact on their mindset, awareness and engagement with CS: *“I think differently working with my company. I'm learning things I didn't know before, I think, it does help me in my community”* (19.EM.IR); *“it sort of gives you that more awareness of what you are using, that's particularly bad for the environment”* (28.EM.UK). This also corroborates leaders' statements on developing follower's capabilities and mindset to help keep them adaptive (09.CEO.US): *“I think we're set quite well for sustainability. I'd say the company is quite adaptive, we're constantly evolving. I feel like we're all quite good at constantly learning and developing into the way the future is going”* (42.EM.NL).

Overall, employees' accounts largely validate the company's and leaders' statements regarding support, development, and learning. Their experiences suggest that supportive leadership fosters empowerment, trust, engagement and broader organisational and societal impact. Yet, employees' accounts indicate that the leadership's approach to coaching occurs within rigid value frameworks (e.g., quarterly reviews tracking “values demonstration”) that may be serving as mechanism to equally enforce values conformity, risking that employees unwittingly over-estimate their sense of autonomy. Another critical perspective emerges from a few employees who highlighted that the level of support may sometimes be insufficient, indicating inconsistencies in leaders' support practices and potential variability in leadership behaviour. This observation suggests that while the organisation's support and growth mechanisms seem largely effective, there may be opportunities to further improve development systems to ensure that all employees feel equally supported. In this light, employees' accounts also provide valuable insights into areas where ‘systems thinking-informed’ intervention and refinement may be necessary.

### **4.3. Theme 3- Partnering Leadership**

Sharing responsibilities and decisions with competent employees has emerged frequently within the three datasets as common leadership' practices, indicating a perceived sort of shared leadership approach.

#### ***4.3.1. Content analysis- "accounts of behaviour as described in company's public documents"***

The company presents leadership as a collaborative partnership where leaders and followers work together with mutual trust and respect to achieve shared goals (CEO book, 2009, p.10). This approach was described as emphasising decentralised decision-making, where both parties play a role in determining how 'things get done' (ESG, 2022). The CEO positions this as a promotion of an 'empowerment' culture rooted in SL principles (CEO book, 2009, p.37). Corporate documents state that they appoint employees to roles of greater responsibility when they have demonstrated alignment with company's values and have the competencies required for success (ESG, 2022, p.21).

Both values and accountability are described as important parts of Company's X culture, where each member must initially take an accountability 'pledge' to be responsible for taking action and making decisions (ESG, 2020, p.63). This approach was described as a way for leaders to 'partner for success' with their people, working together towards the same goal but each within their functions. For instance, their ESG report (2020) described how employees are included in the strategy through Materiality Assessments /listening feedback, as being an important party in its execution (p.36). The emphasis on shared responsibility suggests an effort to cultivate a distributed leadership style, supporting a system where according to the CEO book, individuals influence each other (2009, p.10). Employees accounts in previous

themes corroborate feeling inspired by the company and leaders' values and how it has impacted their own behaviours. Similarly, the integration of employee input into strategic processes (ESG, 2022, p.19), is presented, although not explicitly, as a systemic approach to fostering engagement and adaptability where feedback and collaboration are central.

The company contrasts its empowerment culture with micromanagement, emphasising a non-hierarchical partnership based on equality (CEO book, p.37), and claiming to decentralise power through shared goals (ESG, 2020). Transparent communication and SL training are framed as critical tools to align on SL values and practices, supported by collaboration (working together) to achieve collective goals beyond the organisational boundaries (ESG, 2022, p.19). Performance reviews are designed to clarify individual and organisational goals, foster accountability, and assess employees' readiness for delegation by demonstrating competency and values compliance (ESG, 2020, p.63). The company states that such practices helped to fuel employee's engagement and improve job satisfaction and morale at all levels (ESG, 2020, p.58). Although, from a critical lens they may risk being seen as soft normative tools, constrained by predefined corporate narratives.

Employees are expected to align with company values and to take a pledge before they are entrusted with greater responsibilities (ESG, 2022, p.21), which may suggest a structured reinforcement of corporate values, potentially limiting alternative perspectives to emerge. Furthermore, while partnership is claimed to be based on equality, leaders retain evaluative power (e.g., performance reviews). Thus, in practice, the extent to which followers can challenge leadership decisions remains unclear, potentially undermining genuine partnership. This means that while this 'partnering leadership' practice is designed to be dynamic, it may still reinforce power structures under the guise of partnership; issues that merit further investigations from both leaders and the employee group.

#### **4.3.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders”**

Leaders emphasise granting autonomy to employees by trusting them to make decisions and learn by doing rather than directing their every step: *“As a leader what’s important is empowering the team to make their own decisions, trust them to do their job and learn by doing. I want them to feel supported, not led”* (23.LL.NL). This practice is framed as *“cultivating among employees a “sense of ownership for what they're doing and a sense of empowerment to make things happen”* (11.SL.US), which was said to be achieved through continuous competency-building and support (04.MM.BL).

Competencies were described as one of the central factors in assessing the level of autonomy and decision-making power an employee can be granted: *“it is really important in managing the team, handing over responsibility to them depending on their competencies”* (01.SL.US). Leaders described delegating responsibilities when appropriate while maintaining oversight and adapting their approach as needed: *“my job is setting goals and helping to structure the work, build the competence of my team members so that they're better able to perform in their own roles”* (05.SL.NL). However, they have also acknowledged instances when exerting their authority is necessary, to ensure that goals are being met: *“we work together, but where my authority comes in, I suppose in making sure that we link back into the business goals. And then ultimately, they have the responsibility for making it happen”* (20.LL.UK); *“We’re equal but I may have to be firm sometimes. The team understands that if we didn't beat this deadline, then we wouldn't be carrying on our project goals. So, everybody will be participating”* (04.ML.BL).

Leaders’ accounts suggest that mutual trust and shared input foster employee’ engagement and richer problem-solving. Many leaders further reported that even decision-making power is often shared with the most competent members: *“Anybody can make any decision in the company within their competencies if they reflect on our purpose and our values”*

(09.CEO.US); *“If someone else is better to make a decision, the servant-leader will have no issue giving up that decision to the more capable person as long as it aligns with company’s values and business goals”* (11.TL.US). However, one lower-level leader reported feeling often excluded: *“it feels like the decisions are made without you sometimes, but then over time it’ll just bubbles along”* (20.LL.UK). More importantly, according to the leaders’ accounts, delegation is not dependent on just proven competency, but it is primally tied to accountability to company’s values and strategic goals: *“We try to push decision-making power deep into the organisation, guided by the values and the principles of the business”* (11.TL.US).

Likewise, leaders anonymously viewed accountability as an important part of Company’s X culture, confirming that each new member must first take a pledge for their action (e.g., 05.SL.NL; 04.ML.BL; 49.LL.UK). Critical though, for a grounded accountability and delegation, is to have the right mindset as suggested by many leaders: *“The person who makes the decision has to have the right mindset to be accountable... always considers am I doing the right thing?”* (01.SL.US); *“Everybody on any level who makes a decision takes a look more or less at the values. And say, am I doing the right thing? and does it work for the company X economy?”* (05.SL.NL).

Overall, leaders’ accounts indicate that sharing responsibility and decision power is presented in narratives as being anchored in moral accountability and shared between leaders and employees as long as they satisfy both elements for which they are held accountable for: aligned values and developing the required competencies (see theme1 and 2), to ultimately, achieve company’s strategic objectives; as summed up by this leader: *“You’re going to make decisions with people. But not just give it out to anyone, so if we’ve got someone known to be more professional, they can make the decision according to company values. And you’re there with your people. You’re upfront and sharing power”* (20.LL.UK). According to another

senior leader, this is what makes a servant-leader, as: “*servant-leaders see themselves as bringing people together as strategy setters, but they do not see themselves as superior to the people and are there with them on the frontline*” (01.SL.US).

Leaders describe this leader/team dynamics as a ‘partnership for success’ based on equality rather than hierarchy, corroborating company’s accounts: “*I prefer to use the term team members rather than subordinates and like to share responsibilities depending on the maturity and development needs of the individual team member*” (39.ML.IB); “*The whole team members have their inputs valued and respected. It's not about a boss or followers, it's being colleagues. It's about support, and it's about how can you work the best together, a sort of leadership that goes both ways and to all sides*” (05.ML.NL); emphasising that each within their own functions: “*We are equal but each of us has a role to play*” (11.SL.US).

Leaders referred to their leaders/followers’ relations as a collaborative and mutual (‘*going both ways*’) (05.SL.NL), facilitated by ‘*delegating responsibilities*’ (13.LL.UK), and by “*sharing ideas, suggestions, and ways of working together*” (29.SL.US). For instance, sustainability was often mentioned as a ‘collective effort’ (04.ML.BL).

In addition to collaboration, this shared partnership was said to rely on clear communication, especially regarding moral values, strategy and expectations (09.CEO.US), supported by SL and specific-skills trainings to develop competencies and align on values and mindset.

Reviews were also mentioned as necessary here, to help evaluate the level of competency of each employee, assess how they have lived the company’s values, along with where further developments may be needed. These mechanisms were said to ensure employees readiness for delegation, which may also depend on the situation (discussed next theme), as hinted by this leader: “*they help to know where you put responsibility depending on the situation... but you try to do that at the highest level of their competency*” (05.TL.NL).

Overall, the company's accounts of behaviour reflect a strong integration of SL principles in ways that foster inclusion, engagement, and ethical conduct. Practices such as trust-based empowerment, competency-driven delegation and inclusion of employees, were said to create a values-aligned system where decisions reflect shared goals. However, these same practices also give rise to some concerns.

The strong emphasis on shared values, alignment, and accountability can slip into normative control, where empowerment becomes conditional, and alternative views are subtly sidelined. For instance, strict competency criteria can narrow the scope for creative contributions, or employees that are still building skills may be systematically marginalised, reinforcing informal hierarchies as 'maturity stage' is subjectively assessed by direct leaders. This risk was further highlighted by one lower-level leader reporting feeling often excluded (20.LL.UK). This exclusion could be due to different reasons, but on the same time, it can also suggest that the competency criteria may mask power imbalances. Especially so, given that despite claims of equality, leaders often retain exclusive authority such as in reviews, crisis times and setting the goals, which, are presented as pre-defined ("my job is to set the targets" (05.SL.NL)) rather than co-defined with employees, inconsistent with the claim of each parties mutually decide how things get done (CEO Book, 2009). This is further indicated in other leaders account, like: *"So, um, normally what would happen is I would suggest what the overall objectives are, but then I would say to them, you know, perhaps goals one, two and three are set in stone, but for goal four and five, I will get their input into that kind of things. And then the rest of the workload is their responsibly"*(10.ML.LX) ; *"Well, um, if the goal is to reach, 10 million impressions on a particular product, um, I might say, this is the number I want, how would you do it, whether that's on social media, TV or radio or newspaper, whatever that part would be is down to them"* (39.NL.IB). Moreso, the need to 'be firm' (04.ML.BL) to 'ensure business goals are met' (20.LL.UK), suggests that

hierarchical impulses could further re-emerge during pressure and complexities. These concerns need careful attention and further investigation from the employees' perspectives, as they not only risk undermining genuine equal partnership but also reinforcing hierarchical power structure.

#### ***4.3.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers”***

Employees report feeling more motivated by leaders who grant them autonomy and allowing them to try new things while feeling supported: *“I think the most valuable way [manager] encourages me to advance in my role is by letting me try new things and make mistakes, by trusting me to do the job and that’s motivating”* (19.EM.IR). The wordings such as *‘letting me.... make mistakes’*, suggest an intentional space for learning where risk-taking is encouraged. They also described a distributed division of labour, accounting a customised-style delegation, with roles tailored to individual capabilities: *“within the sales team everyone has their own role, depending on people competencies, [manager] let us kind of have more autonomy which I think works really well”* (16.EM.NL).

Employees emphasised that their manager: *“Acts like one of the team”* (14.EM.UK); *“we refer to managers as coaches, as equal to their team. It never feels like [manager] is, um, pushing authority over us”* (07.EM.UK). They described a supportive relationship with their leaders, working together and sharing responsibilities as equal members of the team, but each within their competencies, corroborating the company and leaders' “partnership” claims: *“[manager] acts like one of the team too. [manager] is not above sharing responsibilities and opinion with the most competent team members”* (44.EM.IB). Such accounts reflect SL's emphasis on leaders as facilitators rather than power figures, promoting a collaborative environment: *“it's more of a collaborative field within the company”* (14.EM.UK), where

diverse inputs are valued, essential to ST. They also reported feel included in decisions: *“I think the majority of times if there is an important decision, it's quite often, um, a collective decision from many opinions on something, because that is the kind of culture that we have”* (27.EM.LX). Although account of top-down decisions from a lower-level leader (*“decisions made without you”* 20.LL.UK) indicates a gap in described inclusion.

Employees demonstrated an understanding that sharing responsibility depends on proven competency and trust: *“I think I've managed to prove myself to the company people I work with. So, they put trust in my ability, they see I'm able to make decisions on things”* (19.EM.IR). Employees accounts validate leaders' focus on accountability, as part of the company's culture and 'pledge' (e.g., 12.EM.UK; 44.EM.IB; 16.EM.NL). They also corroborated leaders' accounts that decisions are essentially guided by the company's moral value of *‘doing the right thing?’*: *“I am given autonomy to make my own decisions, but we must consider first one of our main values which we try to do all of our business by, is that we value doing the right thing”* (07.EM.UK). However, while there is no exact definition of what the 'right thing' entails, it appears to implicitly privilege those whose interpretations of 'right' align with leadership's moral expectations (having the 'right mindset' (01.SL.US) as per leaders' judgement), which may limit critical dissent and enforce normative conformity.

Sharing responsibilities was perceived by employees as empowering and motivating, making them feel included and engaged: *“we have our monthly meetings and quarterly review. it's just involving people. keeping people up-to-date with where the company is, like where the ESG strategy is going, sharing ideas. Um, and I think that just in itself kind of help keeping everybody included and engaged”* (27.EM.LX). Reviews were often described by both groups as facilitators for shared responsibility and inclusion, as well as communication. However, some feel communication needs improving: *“Communication is usually top down. But we understand that it is a big company with many departments so it can be slow*

*sometimes*” (19.EM.IR). Such a top-down communication can undermine genuine partnership and therefore needs further investigation (Chapter 5).

Overall, company, leaders and employees’ accounts, highlight many SL principles- sharing responsibility, ethical engagement, and inclusion such as in sustainability. Employees largely validate leaders’ emphasis on fostering ownership and autonomy, which reflects SL’s focus on egalitarian collaboration and empowering followers through trust and developmental support. Trust is said to foster motivation, engagement and psychological safety, enabling learning through allowing space for mistakes. Genuine distributed autonomy, collaboration and feedback, while reinforcing values alignment, can help enhance adaptability if better structured (discussed further next theme).

However, statements like: *‘depending on people competencies’*; *‘trusts me to do my job’*, *‘put trust in my ability’*, indicate a delegation which may be conditional on leader discretion (like trust). As such, employees not deemed competent or trustworthy yet may experience marginalisation until they *‘prove themselves’* (19.EM.IR). Leaders’ accounts in theme 1, revealed that some employees left as they could not conform with company’s *‘way of working’* or *‘mentality’* (03.LL.UK), unfortunately their side of the story is not known.

However, regular dialogue and collaborative practices suggest partial inclusivity and close SL engagement, although overall communication needs improvement.

A key initial observation suggests that to enhance a true SL/ST practice, authentic transformation requires ensuring that moral frameworks do not become covert tools of conformity and/or inherent hierarchical structures do not mask power imbalances using partnership as a cover or pressure and operational complexities as a pretext. Such emerging tensions are important to acknowledge as they could indicate where SL limitations lie and where a systemic intervention may be useful required.

#### **4.4. Theme 4- Situational Adaptability**

Theme 3 shed light on the nature of the relation between leaders and followers in terms of sharing responsibilities, however, it has also emerged that in some instances, this practice depends on situations.

##### ***4.4.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents”***

Company’s accounts emphasise a commitment to fostering adaptive practices, described as crucial to meet employees, business and stakeholders’ needs (ESG, 2022, p.26). Through initiatives like the Competency Lab, the organisation provides various training in team effectiveness, trust, leading through change, situational adaptability, and many more (ESG, 2022, p. 23), accessible to both leaders and non-leaders. Situational adaptability training, in particular, is highlighted as enabling leaders to gain awareness and skills that help them to flexibly apply different leadership styles according to individual and situational demands (ESG, 2022, p.23; CEO, 2009, p.21). This flexibility in is framed as critical for aligning leadership approaches with employees’ developments, competency levels and situational challenges, while also assisting in determining when responsibilities can be shared with followers (CEO, 2009, p. 54). These adaptive practices were described as one of the key drivers of employees’ coaching process, enabling leaders to see to each employee’s specific needs (CEO, 2009, p.56).

At an organisational level, such flexibility was described as a tool to ensure that employees and organisation are constantly “*evolving*” and staying ‘*adaptive*’, while working together toward the future (p.34). In the documents, there was an emphasis on remaining aware of the different norms in different countries ( ‘*different strokes for different folks*’ (ESG, 2022, p.35)) and on acting with ‘*care*’ for the ‘*well-being*’ of all those involved (p.26).

Such adaptive behaviour were viewed as building among team members '*confidence*' on their own abilities, fuelling their '*engagement*' (ESG, 2020, p.58) and '*empowering*' them, by addressing their unique needs, through practices like 'competitive time-off programs' and stakeholders' feedback (interna/external) (ESG, 2022, p. 26). These procedures were described by the company as being part of SL philosophy, asserting that it enables them to stay true to their values of doing the right thing by pursuing the '*best relevant*' action to every situation (ESG, 2022, p.7). Collaboration (working together for the future) was also considered central to achieving great outcomes; as, according to the company, when leaders and followers '*partner*' for performance it becomes an '*energising process*' to success (p.64). In turn, it was said to create a competent adaptive workforce which translates into individual and organisational excellence (ESG, 2022). However, as per the CEO, this requires commitment from top management, continuous practice, and communication, reinforced through ongoing reviews and feedback (p.57).

Overall, company's accounts position adaptive leadership and practices as central to SL, emphasising empowerment, engagement, and stakeholders' wellbeing. It is believed to enable competency-based delegation, reinforcing autonomy, trust and confidence. By responding to individual situations, promoting collaboration, feedback and dialogues, leaders are said to develop awareness of employees' needs, enabling them to align individual growth with evolving organisational demands, and to adapt accordingly. However, while this aligns with SL/ST ideals of adaptability and inclusion, company accounts highlight potential tension between the aspirational principles of servant-leadership and the realities of maintaining organisational resilience in volatile environments. Reconciling between global adaptability ("different norms in different countries") and uniform ethical standards (e.g., "doing the right thing"), is presented as an easy task, and it remains unclear how the ethical framing of what constitute the right thing is understood in different contexts, and how this variation is

accounted for. Commitment to adapt may be uneven in different countries/environments and may also falter in fast and high-pressure contexts risking leaders to revert to hierarchical ways of working (as found in theme 3). Especially as followers' agency remains dependent on leaders' evaluations, further reinforcing concerns for a potential subtle form of normative control and power imbalances. These tensions highlight the need for deeper insights on how adaptive practices are enacted and whose interests they ultimately serve? As it may indicate a lack of contextual sensitivity.

#### ***4.4.2. Leadership interviews- "accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders"***

Leader accounts validate and highlight the perceived benefits derived from organisational training in both SL and situational adaptability. The latter was described as enabling leaders to become aware of situations, circumstances, and followers' competency stages, supporting better leadership, as suggested by leaders: *"We have several trainings for both servant-leadership and situational adaptability for everyone, to teach them how to place themselves or people in what kind of situation or stage [competency] they are. In leadership especially, it helps managers lead better"* (39.ML.IB). This account reveals how both trainings equip leaders with heightened awareness, enabling them to navigate interpersonal dynamics more effectively, ultimately leading to the reported outcome of 'better' leadership. Making informed decisions about delegation was presented also as a key outcome of adaptability: *"servant leadership is very important in our company as well as situational adaptability...help to know where you put responsibility which depends a bit on the situation and competencies"* (05.SL.NL).

Leaders' narratives point to the crucial aspect of expanding awareness, i.e.- identifying issues and where/ when is the need for intervention (*discussed further in theme 6*). They described how it helps them flex and adapt their leadership styles in response to specific situations: "So

*you learn really to read the situation or how the person is doing in that situation, and then how you can adapt and flex your leadership style depending on them*” (26.ML.UK). These accounts present the leader as follower-centred, responsive and aware that different leadership behaviours may be required to deal with different followers. Adaptability to individuals’ needs and situations is described as central to ‘*servicing*’ others: “*cause not everybody is the same, we need to adapt to our team, and it's not our team adapting to us. So, we are here to serve the team, really*” (39.ML.IB). This notion was further indicated in leaders’ descriptions of the prevailing leadership style as being adaptable and service-oriented: “*We do not really have a dominating leadership; it is a very servant and fluid and flexible kind of leadership*” (26.ML.UK).

This suggests that within this company, SL behaviours are not viewed as rigid but are expected to adjust dynamically. Yet, leaders also stressed that adaptive practices must still remain within predefined organisational norms: “*again it depends on the situation, but it needs to align with wider business objectives and company values*” (05.SL.NL). While this may ensure varied behaviours remain ethical, it also may further perpetuate elements of normative control, where freedom to adapt is acceptable only so far as it aligns with the organisation’s goals and values.

Furthermore, many of the leaders' accounts of adaptive behaviours were linked to various aspects within leader/ follower relations, such as development plans (12.ML.UK); individualised training: “*to see where somebody is struggling*” (04.ML.BL); motivational intent: “*people are motivated by different things. You need to flex, uh, your approach depending on the individual needs*” (28.LL.LX); and well-being initiatives: “*I'm going to adjust for things like mental and physical well-being improvement*” (03.LL.UK). While strongly aligned with SL’s commitment to individualised support, it may risk creating

emotional tensions on leaders who have to be constantly aware and flex their behaviour across diverse situations. This concern was explicitly indicated in this leader's statement: *"As a leader you need to step in and say OK, how can I help the best? That's going to be sometimes difficult, especially for one, a servant leader has to be consciously aware of what you're doing all the time, and that's just merely not possible at times.... just because of the day-to-day situation"* (05.SL.NL). Similarly, another leader spoke of the tension facing a servant leader, having to *"work on a balance of trying to get performance out of a team and making certain that people feel involved..."* (12.ML.UK).

Many leaders reported further tensions in practice between SL ideals and pragmatic organisational demands that highlight the difficulty of maintaining continuous SL behaviours and the need to adapt to the demanding situation instead : *"there are times when I change my behaviour because I've got a deadline to meet. It's keeping it in a balance, it's no longer just about serving, but aiming for something bigger as a team, and the people will know and will participate"* (25.ML.UK). This suggest that while SL principles guide behaviour, complex business realities sometimes necessitate a shift toward balancing collective achievement with pragmatic demands. In that vein, leaders described the need for servant-leadership to include *"a balance between being tough and tender-hearted, for the common benefit of all"* (09.CEO.US); *"to be tough and look for the common benefit of the team and organisation which has stakeholders that depend on good performances to sustain"* (29.SL.US). Such accounts position situational adaptability as a tool for balancing people' needs with performance accountability, enabling leaders to adapt their SL behaviours for the common good (28.LL.LX), and in other tougher situation to sacrifice SL altogether (25.ML.UK; 12.ML.UK). As such, using situationally adaptive behaviours was emphasised my most leaders as the practical way to lead in today's complex business world: *"Servant leadership is there, but there are other skills needed as well, when somebody says to me what's your*

*leadership style, I always say I hope my leadership is appropriate to the situation”*

(12.ML.UK).

Above accounts indicate that leaders perceive ‘partnering leadership’ as dynamically based on individual circumstances, supporting a more distributed and adaptive leadership (aligned with SL principles). However, they also reveal that SL is not unconditional in practice, highlighting the tensions leaders face of balancing service and power, especially when faced with complex business challenges, where situational adjustment and occasional ‘toughness’ and ‘firmness’ are needed, citing the common good as a reason (or an excuse??). Anyhow, by acknowledging the necessity of these measures, leaders shed some lights on ways to address the critics that pure SL might be impractical in competitive business environments with performance demands. Additionally, these important findings lend support to Liden et al’s. (2008) proposition that leaders may adopt varied SL behaviours with different individuals within their workforce (presented further in the chapter 6).

On a broader organisational-level, leaders’ accounts stressed the necessity of adaptability to global and volatile environments they operate in: *“We operate in a fast-paced environment. At some point something might come up and you need to change or adapt to ensure that all runs smoothly”* (33.ML.NL). Most leaders perceive their followers to be adaptive: *“because of the nature of the job, it’s so fast-paced. But we have the people that can adapt to that”* (10.ML.LX). Adaptability is perceived as an important and valued behaviour in followers, leading to creating an adaptive workforce: *“we are constantly learning and adjusting, and we hold our employees accountable to learn and adjust as well”* (22.SL.UK). However, here, adaptability is framed as a competency that employees are ‘held accountable for’, suggesting more of a managerial requirement rather than voluntary, servant-led developmental process- a foundational premise of SL- which risks instrumentalising adaptability as a performance

measure. This again signals a normative expectation and adds to the concerns that the extent of employees' empowerment may have been overly stated by the leaders.

The requirement for alignment with business objectives and company values (05.SL.NL) reinforces this possibility, contradicting the claims that emphasis '*adapting to the team, not the team adapts to us*' (39.ML.IB), since team members are ultimately held accountable to adapt and conform to the organisation's broader expectations and strategic direction. While the recognition that '*not everybody is the same*' (39.ML.IB) demonstrate an understanding of the complex, multi-faceted nature of the people within the system (e.g., social) and the need for leaders to be responsive and adaptive, the above account may suggest somehow an oversight of external dynamic pressures and interactions, where a structured system-thinking strategy may prove useful.

Furthermore, the accounts also indicate that leaders believe that adaptability must start at an individual-level first, i.e. leaders adapting their behaviours to individuals' needs (39.ML.IB), which in turn equips them to adapt to broader organisational challenges: "*to be more adaptive to change you need to be able to change with the individuals within your team. You need to learn about how to deal with certain people then in certain business situations*" (20.LL.UK). These adaptive practices were believed to help develop individuals' 'adaptive mindset' and leading to broader organisational success: "*leaders must change their own behaviour to adapt as opposed to changing processes or policies, because serving others means you have to adjust your own behaviour to match the needs of others. Leadership is a role and the role changes depending on the context and the situation. So, a successful servant-leader has to be creative, able to change their behaviours to be more adaptive and to inspire others to be more adaptive too, to play well on the stage of their organisation*" (11.SL.US).

Leaders continue highlighting the benefits of situational leadership, in creating an adaptive organisation and individuals and enhancing collective engagement (29.SL.US), where processes like communication and training play major roles: *“you have to be willing to learn and adjust, think ahead and bring people along. That's how you move on to be an adaptive leader and create an adaptive organisation and adapt to whatever comes in these volatile environments.... I mean it's just a matter of situation, context and priorities as things go by”* (29.SL.US). The emphasis on “fix-and-adjust” approach demonstrates how SL and ST may integrate, which becomes particularly evident in leaders’ descriptions of how this gained awareness from situational adaptability training, enhances their ability to serve (more in theme 6). Having an adaptive mindset was particularly, viewed as critical to SL’s ‘community’ focus (04.ML.BL), given that: *“the key SL characteristic in play here are the ability to adapt to serve others’ needs which helps in building communities, that is inside and outside the business”* (12.ML.UK).

The emphasis on "reading the situation" (26.ML.UK) suggests an awareness of situational factors and their influence on individual and organisational performance, while prioritising the benefit of all- a key common SL principle. On the other hand, along with an emphasis on monitoring ‘competency stages’, it might represent an oversimplification of follower subjective experiences, reduced to a check list in assessment reviews. It, therefore, again may conceal potential *systemic tensions* that a continual alignment may engender, particularly in balancing service and power and adapting to different contexts and countries’ norms.

Overall, the accounts suggest a somewhat incline towards a leader-centric approach, especially during complex situation. Accounts such as of needing to be ‘tough’, ‘bringing them along’ and ‘getting people adapting to new systems’ (12.ML.UK; 05.SL.NL; 01.SL.US), further suggest a top-down approach, which is contradictory to the ‘partnering

leadership' narrative, and inconsistent with SL's emphasis on empowerment and ST's focus on co-creation.

Are leaders potentially overlooking the tensions inherent in systems interactions? Is the adaptive behaviours narrative a way to address the challenges of a pure SL implementation in contemporary business environments, or a strategy to make conventional managerial adjustments more acceptable while seemingly aligned with SL culture? Or does it truly reflect a shift in power dynamics? The accounts frame adaptability as a positive attribute of service, but the underlying constraints, tensions and potential for normative influence merit further investigation from opposite views, especially if asking who is primarily benefitting from these adjustments?

#### ***4.4.3. Employee interviews- "accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers"***

Employees' accounts largely corroborate the organisational narrative that adaptive serving is both a valued and salient leadership behaviour, linking them to beneficial outcomes from the employees' perspective. Many reported receiving extensive training, including on SL and situational adaptability: *"We have a lot of mandatory training courses on adaptability to take as change happens continuously so we're abreast in general on how the company would like to execute strategies"* (19.EM.IR). This reflects a proactive approach to developing adaptability as both a leadership and follower competency. However, if employees perceive training primarily as a top-down requirement, it may be less effective in fostering genuine adaptability or aligning with SL's growth and empowerment. A clearer systemic structure could help to better define this blurred line.

That being said, many employees did report experiencing genuine support from leaders who adjust to individual needs and situation, linking in their narratives adaptive behaviours with positive personal outcomes, like motivation, wellbeing and commitment: *“they adapt to suit employees’ wellbeing needs. It’s really important at our company making sure that employees are happy and there are lots of well-being and team bonding initiatives, which is really motivating”* (14.EM.UK); *“my manager has been extremely supportive, giving me time off when needed. In return I am dedicated and work very hard”* (16.EM.NL). These accounts reflect SL’s focus on others’ needs and align with ST’s emphasis on leader/follower interdependence. They also demonstrate a causal link where perceived leader’s support and care enhance employee engagement and dedication. These suggest that the adaptive practices described by leaders are salient and experienced positively by many employees, which could enhance the leaders’ influence scope, as corroborated by this long-serving employee: *“Being with this company for such a long time, we have experienced many ups and downs, so I think it instils experience, adaptability and, manager leads by example which is quite important”* (27.EM.LX). This account, especially the last sentence, frames the leader's own adaptive behaviour as a positive and influential model for followers.

Leader’s adaptability was perceived by most employees as a strength, particularly in managing change: *“my manager deals very well with change and difficulties. [manager] is confident and contemplative and able to tailor their approach or response to the needs of the team member”* (15.EM.UK). These accounts support the idea that adaptability, competency and awareness of their needs and wellbeing, are seen as key leadership skills essential for practical management in dynamic environments. Moreover, employees perceive adaptability not only as an individual leader trait but also as a collective process: *“I think for me we’re [leader and team] on the mutual understanding that sometimes it may not be ideal, but this is the situation. So, we kind of work with it together in that way”* (16.EM.NL). This indicates

positive relational dynamics and highlights a degree of collaborative way of working that helps teams manage uncertainty together, underpinning both SL and ST principles. This also brings some validation for leaders' accounts of 'a partnership' where both leaders and followers support each other (CEO 2009; 09.SL.US; 04.ML.BL; 20.LL.UK).

Communication was also viewed by employees to be important for effective adaptability, especially during periods of changes: *"I think [manager] embraces change really well, helps to reassure us, his team"* (02.EM.US); *"they communicate change very well"* (19.EM.IR); *"manager learns why the change is happening, how and what the impact is on us. And then he will communicate it to us. And he'll make sure that we understand"* (30.EM.UK). While these leaders' SL-oriented behaviours are commended and positively perceived by many employees, not everyone shared the same view. Some noted shortfalls in communication during times of change, such as: *"we are not always informed on time, it sure needs improvement"* (28.EM.UK). These critical accounts indicate that what employees perceive as an important core aspect of adaptability and effective change management- clear and timely communication- is viewed as lacking by at least some employees (discussed further in chapter 5). They also suggest inconsistencies in leadership, where adaptive behaviours may not be evenly experienced across the organisation, which somehow undermines claims of unified SL practices. From an ST lens, it signals a weakness in the feedback loops, where leaders may lack the responsiveness or challenges in the organisational systems capacity to keep all employees informed in real-time.

In the context of broader change, like integrating corporate sustainability for instance, employees report a general belief that both leaders and the organisation are well-set, due to their adaptability and learning practices: *"I think we're set quite well for sustainability. I'd say the company is quite adaptive, we're constantly evolving"* (42.EM.NL); *"we are quite*

*adaptive. As soon as a change happens or is going to happen, be it towards sustainability or otherwise, we're very quick at getting on that journey"* (35.EM.UK). Such accounts affirm adaptability as a strength and reinforce the narrative of collective adaptability, reflecting both SL's emphasis on serving the common good and ST's focus on interdependency and learning. Yet, employees accounts stressing the adherence to the company's values in any situation, suggest that again adaptability is potentially embedded within a normative framework: *"we have a set of values that we as a tribe must adhere to. In any situation we aim to do the right thing by our team members, customers, suppliers and all our stakeholders"* (08.EM.UK). This further affirms leaders' claims that in any situation SL values are adhered to but adaptively depending on situation and broader stakeholders' common good. While this may foster inclusion and broad stakeholder consideration, it can inadvertently be suppressing dissent.

This possibility became more prominent following this employee's statement: *"I think, we are a very nice company and very people centred, so sometimes we don't have that courage to ask questions or raise points because others might feel, you know, uncomfortable. Um, and because of that, then sometimes the problems remain hidden"* (06.EM.UK). Other ways in which corporate normative demand, can further keep problems hidden, is through fear of being judged or caught in the political blame, as reported by this manager who is on the same time a subordinate to a higher leader: *"I feel like there's a lot of judgment, but there's not a plan for the business as whole. It's like a political blame. They don't often look to what have we done wrong here, rather why is this going on? it's not like well let's just focus on fixing it. So many issues remain"* (Participant x1, UK). Having no clear direction for the business as 'whole' and throwing blames instead of focusing on collectively 'fixing it', demonstrate a clear systemic imbalance and miscoordination, contradicting the collaborative, problem-solving image.

This was further indicated, by (Participant x3. UK): *“In essence, it feels like there is a strong leadership at times. It's open and transparent, however sometimes it feels like there isn't like a real passion in it. Decision making from top can feel less coordinated.... But because we're always relying on our brand and our name in the history, it's almost not judgmental to change”*. This suggests that judgement is one-way and directed mostly towards the employees, whereas the company's ways remain ‘almost not judgemental to change’. This may limit critical reflexivity, and risks resistance to change, especially from the ‘top’ leadership. In all, although leadership is perceived as strong at times, these accounts flag the need for a more systemic approach to better coordinate decisions, supported by stronger feedback loops and cause root analysis, to sustain the transformative potential of SL, not just sometimes.

Overall, employees' accounts offer strong support for the salience and perceived value of situational leadership practice across the organisation. They perceive leaders as supportive, competent adaptors and change navigators. They link these behaviours to personal motivation, wellbeing and commitment and appreciate the alignment with company values and the stakeholder focus. These experiences reflect positively on SL principles, where awareness, learning, and mutual support are central. However, accounts also revealed divergence in employee experiences, particularly regarding communication effectiveness during change, revealing a gap between leadership ideals and the lived realities of some employees.

Accordingly, the accounts illustrate the perceived benefits of adaptive and supportive leadership approach but on the same time, reveal inconsistencies in practice and hint at the influence of leaders and organisational culture in shaping employees' mindset. As such, it is

worth acknowledging that employee accounts, while often appear quite sincere, may also reflect internalised organisational narratives.

## **4.5. Theme 5- Building Community**

Previous themes highlighted accounts of a cohesive culture, which reflected a community-like environment within the organisation.

### ***4.5.1. Content analysis- “accounts of behaviour as described in company’s public documents”***

Company X's accounts frequently use the metaphor of 'tribe' to describe its workforce. This is presented as a community bound by shared beliefs and a common purpose, rooted in inclusion and acceptance (ESG 2020, p.8). The documents suggest that this fosters a feeling of belonging, which, paraphrasing the CEO’s narrative, implies that individuals find meaning and identity by being part of something bigger than themselves (2009, p.33). The company describes this community as evolving through employees’ efforts, into a 'self-sustaining' and ‘interdependent’ group of individuals aligned with/ and by its values, collaborating towards the same goals (ESG, 2022, p.11). Employees were described as working collectively in a purpose-driven, learning environment, characterised by trust and support, and united by shared beliefs (ESG, 2020, p.27). The documents highlight efforts to foster psychological safety through ‘connections’, care, and supportive spaces for discussions (2020, p. 27). Company’s narratives suggests that such tribal cohesion, motivates and encourages commitment by making members feel included and inspired (ESG, 2020, p.10; ESG, 2022, p.11). This was said to creates a ‘much stronger’ performance and ‘low turnover’, because varied perspectives not only enhances engagement but also result in creative solutions (ESG, 2020).

These accounts reflect key principles of SL, particularly building community, fostering a sense of belonging among followers, and leading by purpose for the greater good. The emphasis on trust, support, and learning environments resonates with SL focus on employee well-being and growth. From an ST perspective, this may suggest positive interconnectedness and shared purpose within the organisation. Accounts describing the valuing of varied perspectives for creative solutions align with ST's recognition of diversity as a systems strength. High engagement as accounted for, suggests collective action around shared, ethically framed goals. However, from a critical lens, the tribal metaphor, with its strong emphasis on shared beliefs and aligned values, may be creating pressure to conform, guided by the subtle demand to belong and to embody the tribe's identity. This can potentially discourage different or dissenting views for fear not to fit in or to make others uncomfortable (06.EM.UK), as previously presented in theme 4.

The company claims to extend its values and purpose beyond its internal community to the "global communities" it touches (ESG, 2022, p.5). Their ESG social impact pillar is explicitly described as starting with its employees and flowing outward (ESG, 2022, p.4), encompassing: diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEI+B) programs, ongoing employee support, and external community commitment (ESG, 2022, p.23). Such actions within the internal community include gender diversity, equal pay, resources for employee wellbeing, free education, grants and more (p.35). The company's accounts report a long history ('legacy of 'service' ) of external community engagement, framed as 'paying forward', exhibited in their public documents, external media and confirmed by all participants (ESG, 2020, p.38). Such examples include substantial financial contributions over the past seven years, partnerships with non-profits and academic organisations and volunteering (ESG, 2022, p.37).

They note that this reflects their purpose of creating positive memories in their communities by empowering their members (employees and leaders) to become ‘self-reliant’ using company’s time, talent, and resources, to give back to the communities where they live and work. Employees are said to be encouraged and enabled with paid time off to volunteer, money and matched donations for their charitable contributions (ESG, 2020, p.38). These reported practices are closely aligned with SL premise to serve the broader community beyond the organisation.

For that, the company is said to facilitate across departmental collaboration and optimise their resources and processes, such as communication and training, to ‘better engage’ their employees (ESG, 2022, p.9). Empowering employees to engage in community service also aligns with SL’s focus on the greater purpose. The company boasts of building decades-long ‘trusted relationships’ (ESG, 2020, p.56), based on ‘aligning’ stakeholders on the importance of ‘reinforcing’ their inclusive values-driven culture (p.35). They perceive building internal and external communities as an integral leader’s role, allowing them to create lasting relationships with their workforce and broader stakeholders, to help making their communities ‘better’ (ESG, 2022, p.5).

Leaders are framed as ‘stewards’, responsible for the overall strategic direction of the company’s ESG (p.13), including community engagement. They hold themselves and their members (leaders and employees) accountable for ‘collectively’ achieving the common goals the company set out (ESG, 2022, p.4, p.6). This accountability was said to start from the CEO, trickling downwards to the senior leadership, cross-regional and cross-functional leaders, and to employees to (ESG, 2022, p.13).

This clear alignment with SL, where the leader’s role is to be a steward of company’s resources to serve the common good (Spears, 1998), was reported by the company to be

facilitated through processes that enable them to engage in ‘meaningful communication’, and to explore and share common objectives and concerns, with their stakeholders (p.9). Even training is not limited to employees but extends to ‘local communities’ and key partners, to align on SL values, language and purpose (ESG, 2020. p.17). External collaboration was also mentioned as a means of soliciting ideas and solutions from all, to create positive ‘economic, environmental, and social value’ (ESG, 2020, p.7). Engaging external stakeholders for ideas reflects an open-system perspective, however, this was stressed to be selective, depending on values alignment and mutual benefits that add value to their operations (discussed further in chapter 5).

Community engagement is, thus, framed as both a moral obligation (“paying it forward”) and a performance enhancer, highlighting positive outcomes, such as collective problem-solving and high commitment (ESG, 2020, p.10). This was perceived to have inspired and energised employees to ‘eagerly’ engage and learn best ways of ‘living’ the company values for the betterment of company’s culture and communities (ESG, 2022, p.25, 38). In that regard, they state that they are aiming for transformational ‘philanthropy’ through a ‘systematic’, collaborative approach focused on long-term change (ESG, 2020, p.37). This described approach and the engagement with diverse stakeholders, suggest an acknowledgement of the organisation's role within a larger socio-economic and environmental system (discussed next).

Overall, Company X's public accounts portray an organisation deeply committed to its values, fostering internal unity, and extending its service externally, drawing heavily on principles aligned with SL (community building, service, empowerment, ethical purpose). However, on a critical lens, these same accounts suggest an extension of external normative influence. The strict emphasis on shared values and alignment as a basis for belonging and collaboration creates an environment where conformity is expected, potentially stifling

dissent and diversity of innovative thought. Contradictions also emerged, such as the tension between accounts of shared partnership and descriptions of senior leadership centralised accountability like for the ESG strategic directions, which may be potentially masking alternative experiences within the organisation. Thus, it necessitates further examination of alternate accounts of diversity of thought and power sharing, especially relating to senior leadership that may resist change or still holding on to traditional leadership approaches. Recognising and balancing these dynamics is crucial for aligning the company's cultural narrative with inclusive, impactful practice.

#### **4.5.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders”**

The leaders' accounts present a consistent narrative of community-building as foundational to the company's identity, frequently described using the metaphor of a 'tribe'. This concept, as described by the CEO, was founded on the premise of belonging, acceptance and care: *“That is where the whole tribal culture comes into play as our way of having security, support, inclusion, and identity. And you have to care for your people and be committed to helping those that we lead succeed”* (09.CEO.US). All participants presented similar narrative which indicate that the company's tribal culture is equally perceived by all and is well embedded globally. Other accounts framed the organisational goal as creating a safe community where expectations are clear: *“Our tribe is interdependent. People care for each-other. The sense of belonging is very high and for me, the most important thing is being part of the bigger company, there's really a sense of community”* (33.ML.NL); *“way before there were great places to work for and awards, we had articulated that we needed to create a community, a safe environment in which people can grow and excel, because it's hard to have a great life in a bad environment, but the expectations are clear”* (11.SL.US). This focus on a safe nurturing community and the growth of its members is a very reflective of SL principles, that prioritise individuals' well-being.

According to the CEO, this was achieved by having “*a people-first mindset leadership*” (09.SL.US), which was corroborated by many other leaders, e.g., “*We are very people-centred company. It's all about people, for me it's the most important thing. Leadership is about being human, and that's how we built our culture*” (05.SL.NL); “*I've got a good solid sort of rapport with everybody on my team. Um, there's mutual trust, mutual respect, we're on the same level*” (20.LL.UK). In addition to belonging, a strong emphasis was on equity, diversity, and inclusion, as important ingredients for the tribal cohesion. Accounts of diversity described the internal community as mixed, multicultural and gender-balanced by most (e.g., 01.SL.US; 04.ML.BL;20.LL.UK;05.SL LX).

Accounts of equality were also reflected in many leaders' statements: “*I appreciate equality ...we all should be treated the same way. You give as much credit to anyone. Every person should be praised regardless. That's when you gain people's respect and admiration. All they want is to feel understood*” (49.LL.UK); “*People that think themselves over others, are not dedicated to people around them*” (33.ML.NL). The term ‘ego-driven’ was frequently used to describe this kind of leaders, which was viewed as a traits that hinders equality and inclusion: “*being egoless is a necessary foundation for servant leadership, also empathy and compassion, otherwise you can't provide them with a solution*” (29.SL.US); “*You really need to see yourself as a servant leader for your team .... But if you have a big ego, you really need to work on that because that's not going to work well for the company, it's really a team effort*” (18.ML.UK).

Inclusion and teamwork were also covered in themes 3 and 4, regarding responsibility, decision and knowledge sharing, however, these accounts present them from a different emotional perspective: “*building trust, interpersonal relationships, a sense of belonging, a safe place to voice your opinion, where we help and coach our people to develop and grow*”

(13.LL.UK). This aligns with ST, where interrelations are central, and SL's focus on fostering psychological safety, where followers can have a voice.

Generally, leaders presented an equal awareness for their role in community-building, for instance another manager stated: *"You've got to be sincere, show that you are really very interested in their opinion, valuing their input...you can't just be selfish, I'm not just hearing, but truly listening. If you can't, they'll find out"* (23.LL.NL). Many others further emphasised the importance of listening, dialogue and feedback, to sustain the inclusive community culture. For instance, leaders commonly described involving employees in decisions as an intentional behaviour to support the tribe's connection: *"I'd discuss anything with the wider team to get their feedback before making a decision"* (04.ML.BL); *"we're really forced to listen to people and see what their view is and then take everything into consideration before making a decision"* (46.LL.UK). This practice of distributed voice was also backed by honesty and humility as key ingredients for fostering a safe community: *"To me is being honest and trust your team to be honest with you too if your idea may not work, that you be open to their insights as well"* (26.ML.UK); *"And that's being part of being humble as well, encouraging them to challenge you and give their opinion"* (05.SL.NL).

This inclusive environment, they explained, is not only practical but also sentimental, because *"you are wanting to make them feel like they have a voice in it"* (22.SL.UK). A particularly significant account describes the CEO's direct engagement with feedback: *"Our CEO, did a listening feedback to make sure that he really understands what people want for the future and what people think are the blockers for the future. And then he took all of that into consideration to push it in the strategy really"* (45.LL.NL). Another lower-level manager stated: *"We're going through changes that are happening within the company. And we are all kept updated. It doesn't matter what level we are, everyone is fed the same information"*

(13.LL.UK). This suggests that communication is perceived to be the same at all managerial levels, unlike with employees.

These accounted leaders' behaviours directly align with SL principles, particularly of listening, honesty, humility, and empathy. These also suggest leadership responsiveness to employee concerns at the highest level, with feedback reportedly influencing strategic direction, however, there is no concrete evidence how or to what extent? Leaders further account for their integral role in building this community by actively being part of it, building interpersonal trust and creating inclusive, values-driven workplace: *"you have got to continually work at embedding the importance of the culture and values in the organisation. A great coach spends a lot of time in the community of the business building trust with the people that they lead"* (09.CEO.US). Another leader describes their approach in more details: *"I try to inspire people by just being there, not being arrogant and being authentic. So, it is about building that trust and connection with people and then you need to lead by example and that will project on others overtime"* (22.SL.UK).

Accounts in theme 1, revealed that employees globally expressed being inspired by their leaders consistently modelling company's values (e.g., 02.EM.US: 41.EM.FR:17.EM.UK), suggesting that leading by example, being authentic, honest and humble are essential for fostering a culture of engagement and cohesion, as further stated by this leaders: *"maybe in showing that we are for the people, do look for people who care and are sensitive, maybe at a point they will show those sort of traits as well on a personal-level"* (20.LL.UK). To back up these claims, leaders describe their active involvement in DEI+B (diversity, equity and inclusion+ Belonging) initiatives, such as participation in groups and forums: *"to teach everyone about well-being, and how to feel a sense of belonging in the company"* (13.LL.UK), indicating a conscious effort to build an inclusive environment.

To ensure these practices throughout, leaders assert that they rely on clear communication and training: *“communicating the outcome to team and the reasons behind and encouraging them to challenge it and give their opinion”* (20.LL.UK); *“the training cover what we define as DEI+B. Then we explain why it's important... then we talk about what kind of imbalances we have in our company and what can we do to improve. So, we are obviously as a company trying to address those things”* (26.ML.UK). These are said to be further facilitated by continuous reviews of employees’ developments and how they lived the company’s values and manage their biases (18.ML.UK; 50.ML.FR). These processes were perceived to help embed a community mindset and promote ‘collaborative, purpose-driven behaviours’ (01.SL.US) throughout the organisation, i.e. *“A ‘we collective’ mindset rather than ‘individual’ mindset”* (01.SL.US).

In turn, leaders' accounts highlight that this ‘we’ mindset positively impacts employees’ motivation, inspiration, engagement, idea sharing/collaboration, job satisfaction and values-alignment: *“to motivate people is to create a good work environment where everybody is happy and help each-other”* (39.ML.IB); *“it actually creates an environment for people to actually come forward if they have ideas”* (46.LL.UK). High employee engagement figures were also cited by many as evidence: *“we measure level of commitment through employee engagement survey every two years. That number for the last several years has hovered around 93%. Most global organisations hover in the 30% range. In our case, it's over 9 out of 10 people are doing that, so over 9 out of 10 people are putting their best effort into their work.”* (01.SL.US); *“we have a high level of commitment toward our employees. Um, if you look at our research over 25 years, 98% of employees say they love to tell people they work at our company. 97% say that they believe their values are aligned with the company values”* (09.CEO.US).

The emphasis on a 'we' collective input, reflects relational awareness, recognising that engagement and motivation are enhanced when individuals are seen as valued contributors to the whole. Importantly, these accounts present a leadership and workforce narrative where followers are listened to and encouraged to challenge and speak up, challenging the previous concerns about conformity and stifling dissent. When asked how they managed to influence and embed this sense of community throughout the organisation, leaders stated that it was achieved: *"by showing them [workforce] our [company's] 'just cause'", framed as "a group of people that come together to protect and care for each-other. And if we are doing that every day, then we are making a contribution to their lives"* (09.CEO.US); *"being there for your team on personal level, showing care for their wellbeing and respect"* (04.ML.BL). This notion directly reflects SL's ethical and caring focus.

Similarly, the accounts extend the concept of community-building beyond the organisation. Leaders assert that employees are being empowered and supported to benefit their communities both inside and outside, describing their engagement as *"aspiring to be a part of something that is bigger than themselves"* (01.SL.US); *"There are often team activities that take place which we support, so we have a very altruistic ability and desire to contribute to the communities in which we live and work, and in creating a workplace where people can be proud and go home maybe a little healthier than when they arrived"* (29.SL.US).

Leaders also report being empowered to use company time (given paid-off days) and resources for local community support: *"If I decided that I wanted to use the proportion of the budget account to support, uh, a local not-for-profit organisation or something, I would have the freedom to do that. We would be empowered at that level"* (33.ML.NL). The freedom given to leaders to collaborate with local stakeholders or to allocate budget for local causes (33.ML.NL) reflects SL principle of stewardship. Many leaders expressed that they perceive it as their integral role to encourage community-building both inside and outside the

organisations: *“We always look for opportunities to build a network of people within our company or even a network with the community in which our company exists”* (12.ML.UK); *“you are part of the community, so you need to allow some time and resources to support it and build connections. Um, and if employees want to get involved in something like that as part of sustainability, we'll support them”* (29.SL.US).

This internal and external community-building, as explained by leaders, is founded on the premise of *“a place where you go to work every day, you are protected by a compelling set of values, and you go home happy. You will make a contribution to something bigger than yourself”* (09.CEO.US); *“If people do not find a supportive environment at work, what's that doing to their family, community?”* (11.SI.US). Leaders' accounts describe a holistic perspective in their external relations, where internal organisational system, directly impacts external systems. However, it oversimplifies the interplay of complex external factors dynamics, such as social and personal circumstances, contextual background, and broader issues like structural or economic inequality. So, while the workplace may play a role in impacting external community, it is just one part of a much bigger picture.

External interactions are also said to be facilitated by ongoing dialogues and collaboration such as working *“a lot with our stakeholders, volunteering, getting new apprentices in, having those relationships with local ecology groups and the universities and the schools locally. It really creates those connections”* (26.ML.UK). Leaders also account for formal processes to monitor and incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives: *“We conducted a materiality assessment, to include stakeholders' opinions ... the feedback enabled us to identify and confirm which issues are of greatest concern across stakeholder groups, starting from our tribe”* (01SL.US).

The importance of interconnection was emphasised by many, like: *“We have a strong connection within the company. I think that helps make leadership and the teams, and everybody else outside the company as well care for each other... because we are part of that whole, you know, we are part of the bigger picture”* (20.LL.UK). However, building such close community and connections with stakeholders was stressed to be contingent on values alignment: *“We are also selective with who we do business with, there must be somehow a close alignment with our purpose and values”* (11.SL.US); *“We set the example for our stakeholders by demonstrating our values in all our interaction and we call our partners to do the same”* (01.SL.US). In that, along with the free SL training extended to all stakeholders, strict selections and modelling are also extended externally, to ensure purpose and values alignment. This demonstrates a deliberate effort to embed company’s values across systems, however, ‘calling stakeholders to do the same’, hints at extending normative pressure over to external actors.

The leaders’ accounts predominantly present a vision of a highly supportive and responsible organisational culture and tribal unity, whereas a few other accounts, revealed significant contradictions, internal fragmentation, and other underlying tensions. One leader spoke of how recent events and going hybrid may have somehow hindered connections, and so more needs to be done in that respect: *“But then a lot of it's been impacted, I think, by covid. and, uh, the fact that lots of people are working from home. So, I guess the organisation can become a bit fragmented. So, I think we could probably work harder at building the kind of community within the organisation at a local level”* (12.LL.UK). Another leader shared that not all employees felt connected with the community culture and ‘did not last’, because: *“if it doesn't sit comfortably well with you, then you are never going to involve yourself within the whole culture and the whole community that we've created here... we do connect outside as well as inside of work within the teams. um, and she said, oh I don't like mixing with people*

*from work outside of work.*” (03.LL.UK). As such stress was made on recruiting individuals whose values align with the company, which may create stability, but potentially could undermine diversity and inclusion, marginalise others and promote homogeneity. There is no accounts from the departed employee to crosscheck their experiences, however, a significant critical account came from one middle manager, moving to another organisation for a senior position, openly stating that: *“the company would promote we're a ‘tribe’, we're all one big unit, but within that unit, there's separate tribes, you know? it's all about promoting internally. And when you have individuals in specific jobs, uh, for years and years, it becomes their own mini culture. The longevity creates entitlement, then, um, you don't have to get involved, just throw orders. So, you have separate cultures within a culture”* (Participant x1).

It is not clear whether this is the reason for their move or just simply going for a higher position elsewhere (which is the case), but their disapproval with own direct senior and board managers was clearly expressed. Nevertheless, this accounted fragmentation within, highlights a significant gap between the organisation’s rhetoric of unity and equity, and the internal reality of some participants. It suggests the existence of silos, particularly at senior leadership level, that may operate with different norms, priorities, or power dynamics.

Another lower leader (Participant x2) describes a cultural norm of selective voice at these senior levels: *“there’s always a select group of management who can promote their voice to eachother, but when you get down in the ranks, it’s very subservient”*. This reflects an informal hierarchy, reinforcing critiques that SL alone may not sufficiently address power imbalances or challenge entrenched hierarchical structures, despite its inclusivity premise.

This manager's account (Participant x3) further exposed this limitation, highlighting SL’s weakness in unstable/ complex environment: *“is all good from a stable environment, but I think that from an individual level, it doesn't promote creativity and doesn't make you [as a follower] step out of the boundaries a little bit of yourself, uh, as much as wanting to make*

*sure I'm [as a follower] being obedient, so that I work another day*". This strong critique indicates that the perceived need for obedience to navigate these internal sub-cultures and ensure job security can suppress individual agency and creative risk-taking. This could undermine the goal of building an 'interdependent' tribe, as it requires mutual influence and shared power, not just shared language.

Another account elaborated on the challenge posed by such senior leaders with role longevity: *"Uh, because some people have been with the company in their roles for a long time. So, I think the challenges for these is to really stop and think before talking or acting... I think there needs to be a bit of a mindset, uh, shift, that doesn't create biases and doesn't make people uncomfortable, a change management really if you want the challenge and growth mindset"* (26.ML.UK). This points to potential resistance to change and the persistence of biases within a few established seniors of the organisation, requiring deliberate 'change management' and mindset shift' efforts. A second manager advocates for external recruitment: *"we need to recruit new people, um, at senior levels... it will also change the way every department work"* (05.SL.NL), implying that new perspectives at senior levels are needed to drive necessary changes across departments. The CEO acknowledged this tension, stating: *"At first look, traditional top-down "my way or the highway" managers think what we have done with our tribal culture and servant-leadership is too soft, warm, and fuzzy, until they track our results. Then they sit up and begin to take notice"* (09.SL.US). This was echoed by another leader: *"the education and reality check need to include the board and senior leadership, because we have a number of board members who have quite to digest the fact that not-for-profit company can get to sustainability by themselves. So, we need to continue to state reality and keep abreast of it"* (11.SL.US). This suggests a misalignment between company's SL's rhetoric and the reality of some senior leaders prioritising profit

over purpose, which the CEO attributed to: *“Ego, greed, short-term thinking, playing the finite game instead of playing the infinite game, um, a lack of empathy”* (09.CEO.US).

The accounts clearly position leaders, especially from the CEO downwards, as central to defining and embedding the culture, values and ESG goals. While this provides clear direction, it also represents a top-down influence that could be unintentionally feeding the resistance to change at top levels, particularly if ‘separate tribes’ are already forming with their own norms and voices. However, education and continuously ‘stating reality’, are said to be essential for traditional top-down managers to ‘begin to take notice’, paving the way for a new way thinking.

Leaders' accounts present a strong vision of a values-driven culture rooted in servant-leadership and values, where community, care, and empowerment are central to fostering psychological safety and stewardship. Such aspiration is well described by this leader, while also acknowledging that it not an easy task: *“we're looking to sort of create very much a tribal atmosphere where people support each other in work and in reality, that's kind of probably more difficult than it would sell”* (04.ML.BL). Efforts to model humility, encourage open dialogue, listen to stakeholders and integrate feedback into strategy reflect genuine aspirations by some leaders to create an inclusive, adaptive environment. Yet, others described exclusion, obedience, job insecurity and top-down authority, particularly at senior levels and during complexities, raising critical questions about the extent of employees’ empowerment, inclusion and space for dissent. Furthermore, while employees’ engagement efforts and feedback are formalised, it remains unclear how consistently these are acted upon or how far suggestions travel up the decision-making hierarchy. This merits further analysis of employees’ experiences.

#### ***4.5.3. Employee interviews- “accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers”***

The employees’ accounts offer a rich picture of organisational life that mirrors and adds details to the leadership narratives. A notable consistency emerges in how employees, across locations and levels, refer to the workforce as ‘tribe’ or community, engendering a feeling of a positive workplace environment: *“we don't call ourselves teams generally, we're all called Tribe. It actually breeds a really nice environment for people to want to come to work every day”* (16.EM.NL). Another described the tribal community as: *“a very mixed tribe of people and leaders that are very close, not just managerial, but employees within each team as well... which is a really nice environment”* (15.EM.UK). Employees further describe diversity and gender balance as valued organisational qualities: *“Cause generally in a lot of companies I've worked for, it's very male orientated, but actually the workforce within company X is very much balanced as there is a very big diversity”* (08.EM.UK).

Various similar accounts suggest that the tribe concept appears to carry a significant weight amongst employees, widely experienced as creating a sense of belonging, inclusion and motivation. Such accounts resonate with SL principles around care, empowerment, and belonging, and align with ST in how employees perceive themselves and their leaders as interconnected parts of a larger whole, as indicated further: *“people definitely sort of feel less disenfranchised and more part of the team and more confident that they've got support around”* (07.EM.UK); *“Making it better by being supportive and being part of the team”* (16.EM.NL). Employees also reported positive experiences of genuine care and support from leaders, that reinforce accounts of psychological safety: *“They really take care. They are very considerate about employees... you could feel it that you are in a safe environment. It's very good atmosphere, very pleasant. And very supportive”* (14.EM.UK); *“There is a lot of interpersonal relations, it's very friendly atmosphere... we have a workplace healthcare and*

*is a big part of our culture in terms of what we[employees] have for well-being initiatives”* (17.EM.UK). Leaders’ ‘people-first’ approach is validated in here and perceived as authentic, with employees noting its impact on their own attitudes, well-being and motivation by feeling valued: *“they are very people-centred, I think when other employees see that, they actually realise that company X is a good company to work for. Cause they recognise people not just their academia, but also for their work ethics and how they work within the company and in teams”* (32.EM.LX). This recognition was found in previous themes to be important not only for fostering psychological safety but also for making SL values more salient.

Care and inspiration were also associated by employees with strong team support and global bonding, perceived to have enhanced role effectiveness: *“We have our ups and downs personally, or in terms of motivation, but the rest of the team is always there to help, sympathise and motivate”* (16.EM.NL). Another shared: *“good relationship within the team, I do feel connected in the sense that I can speak to them either about work or personal, um, issues. And I think I'm appreciated in the company and very accessible as well to help. I think it motivates me, it helps me in my role”* (41.EM.FR). Employees also described collaborative environment, perceived as strengthening the global community: *“we have a good relationship at work in different parts of the country. A lot of it is because we work together a lot”* (19.EM.IR). Above accounts suggests that the organisational community is experienced as globally integrated, creating a source of development and motivation, that aligns with SL's focus on intrinsic motivation<sup>1</sup>.

Others mentioned tensions within teams: *“Working in a team is like a roller coaster there is many ups and downs over the year more people easier to confide in and others which sometimes bring about negativity which I try to ignore”* (47.EM.NL); *“there are some*

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<sup>1</sup> *fostering a safe and close environment for followers to grow and achieve their potential such as promoting a sense of meaning in their work, which extends beyond the organisation (Spears, 2010).*

*clashes of personality, but that's just, I suppose part of the job, that isn't usually a problem but as an entire team, I think we work together very well. I think it's a good team”*

(44.EM.IB). This suggests that while the dominant narrative is one of interconnection, support and collective motivation, there are underlying interpersonal complexities within.

Such instances may not always be disruptive, described by employees themselves as “part of the job,” but they highlight that organisational life is experienced as inherently dynamic, and that interconnection, while a strength, also involves navigating relational tensions.

Employees, shared instances of such challenges, while also pointing to how their leaders’ support was valuable in managing them: *“I sought help from my manager regarding an issue with a work colleague, and they listened carefully and did not judge, validated my experience and offered advice on how best to deal with certain situations or personality types”*

(40.EM.UK). This highlights how leaders’ empathy, listening and responsive guidance can mitigate conflict, foster psychological safety, and maintain relational harmony.

Employees also describe an environment open to knowledge-sharing and for expressing concerns: *“always open to new ideas or new ways of looking at things, which is quite motivating”* (17.EM.UK). Another stated: *“we're [employees] always included, we share information, share knowledge, concerns, it's never closed off”* (32.EM.LX). The reviews were also mentioned as an important venue for dialogues and voice: *“I think the reviews also gives us employees such an opportunity to share our views and concerns and express ourselves and I feel listened to, they do give everybody the opportunity to develop”*

(02.EM.US). As previously discussed, the strong internalisation of the culture, including the tribal identity, can foster unintended pressure to conform or maintain harmony, which may stifle critical voice. This concern is partially mitigated by accounts of employees feeling empowered to speak up: *“we're encouraged to speak up on any issues, and we are listened to. So that's a great thing”* (44.EM.IB); *“[manager] just gives me an uplift, uh, just to share my*

*voice. Cause sometimes I'm not comfortable with that, and she takes what we say on board"* (08.EM.UK). The feeling of being genuinely heard is further expressed in multiple accounts: *"[manger] will kind of retain information and at a later date, they will bring something up that you said a few months ago. So, it feels like they truly listen"* (14.EM.UK). Another employee stated: *"[Manger] listens to everything and if they have any chance to help or to make moves for the issue for the staff, they will"* (41.EM.FR) ; *"[manager] doesn't hesitate to say is a good idea. And makes things move on from our discussion"* (17.EM.UK). These accounts suggest that listening is experienced as authentic, praised and acted-upon when possible, although not every time: *"I think whatever our ideas are, they are getting listened to. But then it doesn't always mean that it will be that way, but there's always the possibility to make your voice heard"* (19.EM.IR).

Others reported being included in broader organisational processes as positive a part of the tribal community: *"they've been doing a listening kind of feedback exercise to get some voice from our people about things that could be, uh, included that they don't see... And I agree with what's being shared, the, uh, strategic initiatives for the next like five to 10 years"* (17.EM.UK); *"I think they're also very transparent in their goals and what they want for the future of the company, um, where we all feel like we're part of it. So yeah, it's great"* (35.EM.UK). These further highlight positive experiences of psychological safety in sharing ideas, voicing concerns and inclusion in long-term strategic dialogues, which indicates that at least in part, company X managed to create open spaces for voice and development.

However, while voice is welcomed, its impact on decisions may be limited, as per above account (19.EM.IR), so employees empowerment scope remains delicate.

Consistently, many other employees link community belonging to commitment, inspiration and productivity: *"I've been part of a fantastic team during my time here and it has definitely created a community that I want to be a productive part of and to come to work"* (27.EM.LX)

; *“I think we're all inspired by each other's ideas or views”* (07.EM.UK). Others, employees expressed a sense of pride for being part of the company stemming from a shared sense of community and a good perception of the company and leadership: *“I'm very proud to be part of the company. Uh, I think that it's a great company to be an employee for. I think the values and the workplace culture are, um, just amazing. The actual sort of how the workplace is, um, how it treats their employees, it's brilliant”* (35.EM.UK). Other contrasted their experiences with previous workplaces: *“I've worked in a company before, which is horrific, where the head of finance, who shouts and stand over you. A horrible environment to work in, cause you're working in like a fear environment to get something wrong. But even, if you make a mistake in company x they're like, don't worry about it. They call it a learning moment”* (08.EM.UK); *“It's a very good atmosphere, very supportive, friendly. I've worked in various jobs in the past and I think definitely this is quite a large proportion of feeling settled in my role”* (19.EM.IR). These accounts suggest that the organisational community is experienced as distinctively positive, particularly for its perceived safe environment and approach to mistakes as learning opportunities.

Employees described their experience as extending beyond traditional job satisfaction, to encompass a holistic cultural experience: *“It's not just your job satisfaction, or what you earn or your team, it's the whole culture. It's everything about company X is what makes it work and makes more inspiring”* (40.EM.UK). Some employees account for financial schemes practices experience as creating a sense of shared purpose and reinforcing equality: *“we have a bonus based on our gross annual profit. It means that we kind of feel like we're all working towards the same goal, which is obviously to succeed and sustain the company and the workplace culture. So even though we may not be high up with managers, we feel like we're on an equal level with them”* (17.EM.UK). This sense of shared purpose was said to extend beyond the organisation.

Many employees attributed their external community engagement to being inspired within the tribal community: *“Seeing how close our working relationship has grown gives me a level of optimism when being out in the community. I very much enjoy giving back to others and the wider community”* (28.EM.UK). Another shared: *“I’ve been encouraged to do some work on like mental health within the company. It makes me feel good that I’m helping, and I’m making the world better”* (15.EM.UK). Employees’ accounts highlight the trickle-down influence of internal values on external constituencies, reflecting both SL’s focus on service and ST’s emphasis on interconnected systems. This aligns with leaders’ statements that being part of a close internal community inspires individuals to be ‘more purpose-driven’ and to ‘contribute to something bigger’ (09.CEO.US; 11.SL.US).

Employees also perceive their leaders as acting as stewards, from the top down: *“The business is well known greatly for its environmental initiatives, but also for helping in the community. It is in branches all over the world so they’re very good at promoting that in the organisation that’s from executive level down to employees”* (16.EM.NL). This suggests awareness and appreciation of the organisation’s broader responsibility and supports narratives that community-building, both internally and externally, are transmitted down through leadership. Multiple accounts reported concrete experiences of being encouraged and empowered by their leaders to get involved in their communities: *“managers encourage you to help out in the community. Like recently, they gave us all £60 each within a team and then we had to go out and do something good with it. This was a very rewarding day, it helped build team relationships and made a difference to the community”* (08.EM.UK). This indicates that community engagement is not just encouraged rhetorically but supported with resources and time, corroborating company’s narratives.

In addition to communication (including in reviews) and collaboration, employees also confirm the provision of groups and training on EDI+B programs: *“They offer inclusion and*

*diversity sort of training for everyone. Um, it covers work-life balance, mental health, job satisfaction, morale, inclusivity and equity” (07.EM.UK). As of equity, many employees also accounted for experiences of equality and reduced hierarchy, as already presented in theme 3. Others praised executives for bridging personal and professional barriers: “can walk past Xxx who's the CEO here, and he would stop and ask about your family and things... he knows all about your personal life and your work life. So, I think that makes it feel more of a family environment, and that makes you put that extra effort in” (15.EM.UK). Some also shared own experiences to support their statements: “when a bunch of us are going to the pub, [manager] will come along. He's a great person to talk to about personal problems, So, yeah, our relationship is more about friendships than leadership” (07.EM.UK). These accounts of perceived informal relationships, suggest positive employees/ leaders’ dynamics, creating a sense of psychological safety and close connection that motivates extra effort. Yet, few contradictions emerged.*

One participant noted ‘feeling disconnected’ due to the physical separation of leadership sittings : *“The leadership group and directors sit together but in a different floor but then that's not to say that I'm disconnected, but it's my own perception. I think relations would be better maybe if we were located beside each other” (Participant x3). These sitting arrangements are in odds with the narratives of equality and reveal how structures can easily undermine the company’s ideals they are trying to embed, if there is a perceived misalignment between both. This tension echoes another employee’s, expressing feeling that the gradual move to hybrid work and Covid-related shifts, fragmented internal community: “the organisation can become a bit fragmented. So, I think we could probably work harder at building the kind of community within the organisation at a local level” (17.EM.UK). Another expressed a desire for a structural change: “If I can change something, just having maybe some small structure where we can all meet often... but I think the office began*

*something that is very democratised*” (Participant x4). These challenges suggests that the tribal community is vulnerable to fragmentation under changing work conditions, requiring active effort to maintain, such as a reflective structural change at organisational level, to effectively uphold the equality and connectedness perspectives at individual levels.

Employee accounts of behaviour within Company X largely reflect positive experiences of the organisation's 'tribal' culture, suggesting successful alignment between the company's values and many employees' lived experiences. Employee accounts frequently emphasise the positive aspects of the organisation's tribal culture, highlighting experiences of community, belonging, and purpose. Particularly notable, are the accounts of voice, listening, equality, diversity, care, and team support. There is clear evidence of distributed leadership (although the extent is questioned), feedback and open forums, training and inclusion programs, well-being and shared rewards schemes and transparent communication about strategic goals. This reflects a strongly aligned SL environment, supported by efforts to foster psychological safety, shared purpose, and strong connections internally and with external communities.

However, a critical lens reveals potential areas of normative control and underlying tensions. The unified use of term tribe, while experienced positively, suggests a language norm that may be creating an implicit expectation of tribal belonging and alignment, which makes it difficult to question or deviate from, without risking marginalisation, judgement or fear of appearing inconsiderate. Structural contradictions, limitations to influence, team dynamics, and the challenges of remote work suggest that the espoused values of equality and inclusion may not be fully realised in organisational structures. The impact of these tensions on tribal cohesion, suggests that maintaining the sense of community requires active effort and adaptation, particularly as different work conditions evolve. This is particularly important, given leaders' accounts revealing more internal fragmentation into ‘separate tribes’ and entrenched power-driven behaviours linked to longevity, that are believed to stifle creativity

and dissent. Particularly significant is the resistance to change and to embrace CS at board and senior leadership levels, creating a disconnect in company's values and purpose.

Overall, the accounts collectively suggest an organisation that is broadly successful in fostering connection and purpose for many, while simultaneously struggling with the complexities of navigating internal dynamics and maintaining a strong, empowered value-driven community that adapts to changing conditions. However, the presence of critical, reflective voices within leadership suggests potential for authentic transformation if these insights can be translated into meaningful structural and cultural mindset changes.

#### **4.6. Theme 6- Expanding Awareness**

Previous themes highlighted the importance of awareness of situation and followers' needs, to adapt leadership behaviours accordingly. This theme delves deeper into its dimensions, to analyse its systemic depth.

##### ***4.6.1. Content analysis- "accounts of behaviour as described in company's public documents"***

The company's accounts revealed signs of a holistic orientation in its culture, practices, and strategy, portrayed through the way it frames its values and defines success. For instance, it states that an individual cannot win 'apart from the team/tribe' and that individual contributions are directed toward the success of the organisation 'as a whole' (ESG, 2020, p.6). Such framing align with ST's emphasis on interdependence and SL's urge to adopt a 'whole'<sup>2</sup> view, when looking at anything. The company also accounts for a stakeholder-inclusive approach, emphasising that responsible action must consider impacts on all 'those affected' by its operations (p.6). The company's stresses that its approach stems from its value

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<sup>2</sup> A 'Whole' or holistic view is described as using a systems thinking approach which allows to see the wider picture to understand the unity and interconnection among parts (Barry, 2008), and their overall impact on the whole (Williams et al., 2018).

of doing the ‘right thing’ in creating positive social, environmental, and economic impact and relations (ESG, 2022, p.42). For instance, in relation to their environmental impact, it reports focusing first on understanding their impacts and then examining the best methods for emission reductions (p.6). On the economic side, it says to be focusing on establishing appropriate systems to better assess the financial implications of reduction-related risks and opportunities (p.6). On the social side, it is aiming at developing ‘internal capabilities’ among individuals to effectively address these challenges (p.7).

Similar accounts described its approach as ‘integrated’ and ‘holistic’ in benefiting people, planet and profits (ESG, 2022, p.42, p.58). This notion ties back to the earlier theme of community-building, where leaders and employees demonstrated an understanding of being interconnected parts of something larger than themselves. The company positions its leaders as ‘stewards’ of their company, empowered by resources and time (see theme 5), with a commitment to being a ‘responsible corporate citizen’ for the benefit of all stakeholders (ESG, 2022, p.8). They define being a good corporate citizenship, as a top-down and bottom-up integration, coming from every division and department in the organisation (Company website, 2024).

The company, reports aiming for a ‘transformational’ approach to their strategies towards long-term change. Particularly, CS-related, which it defines as taking a ‘systemic’, collaborative approach to ‘philanthropy’ (ESG, 2022, p.8). This transformational change is said to require for the next two years, establishing internal capacities, to engage the tribe and realistically achieve attainable goals (ESG 2022, p.17). For this purpose, it describes efforts to facilitate cross-collaboration, stakeholder engagement and optimising resources and processes (ESG, 2022, p.9). For instance, feedback and training programs are described as mechanisms to foster organisational agility and align members with a unified sustainability

‘mindset’ in all regions (p.9). The company stated that their global HR leaders conducted group listening tours to assess ‘levels of awareness’ of all its members globally and gain insights into issues of greater concerns to them (ESG, 2022, p23). These processes are said to extend to external stakeholders through collaborations (soliciting ideas from all) and maintaining long-term relationships (ESG, 2020, p.6). It reports conducting materiality assessments to identify the wider stakeholders’ concerns, in both operational and ESG strategies (p.7). The company also accounts for its fix and adjust<sup>3</sup> approach in three steps-careful consideration, venture, and correct/ adjust as needed (p.55), allowing them to gain awareness of their mistakes and adapt accordingly. This adaptive approach (see theme 4) is said to be reinforced by narratives of ongoing reviews, continuous improvements and ‘learning’, to better ‘refine’ the strategies (p.38).

Overall, the company present a relatively harmonious view of internal and external stakeholder dynamics; however, they offer limited acknowledgment of the underlying tensions and complexities that arise from these interactions, such as power imbalances or contextual adaptability, despite recognising different drivers in different regions (ESG, 2020). This suggests that systems thinking may be applied more instrumentally than implied. An ST approach requires recognising the complexity of these relationships, including interdependencies and underlying sources of conflict and synergy, to develop a more realistic understanding of the organisation and broader systems. For instance, although a mindset shift, particularly among senior leadership, was recognised as essential for structural transformation (see Theme 5), the emphasis on it being ‘unified’ across all regions, risks reinforcing homogeneity rather than embracing context-sensitive perspectives as a resource

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Fix and adjust’ is part of a systems thinking approach used to improve “the capability of identifying and understanding systems and devising modifications to them to produce desired effects” (Wade and Arnold, 2015, p.675).

for innovation. More importantly, it suggests pressure for global normative consistency across different contexts, which may unintentionally limit local adaptation or overlook underlying challenges. This raises questions about how genuinely open the organisation is to diverse local norms and perspectives? While this is beyond the scope of this research, the tension between cultural dynamics and standardisation warrants deeper exploration and flags a valuable direction for subsequent future research.

In sum, the company's accounts suggest an organisation that has made efforts toward awareness and sustainability. However, while the company promotes holistic values, questions remains on whether these serve as equitable moral guides or primarily to maintain strategic and normative alignment rather than genuine power-structural change or contextual adaptability? Further insights are needed from both groups.

#### ***4.6.2. Leadership interviews- “accounts of SL behaviour as described by Leaders”***

The leaders’ accounts consistently frame their approach using expressions such as “being forward thinkers” (11.SL.US), “the bigger picture” (09.CEO.US), “being part of the whole” (22.SL.UK), and “holistic viewpoint” (12.ML.UK). The CEO positions this orientation as integral to servant-leadership, asserting that interconnectedness, spanning employees, families, communities, and external stakeholders, necessitates leaders consistently asking themselves: “*are we fact-based? Do we see the bigger picture? Do we have balanced opinions?*” (09.CEO.US). Many leaders reinforce this framing, with one senior leader stating: “*there is this sort of a direct connection across the business, and people feel part of the whole... We [leaders and employees] have this sort of ‘as part of the whole mindset’ in the way we operate*” (22.SL.UK). Other leaders corroborated this collective orientation: “*leadership and the teams, and everybody else care for each other because they don't want to let anybody down because we are part of that whole, you know, we are part of the bigger*

*picture, and we all have to play our own part within that, in making sure that we've done what we can to influence that particular part of the wheel” (26.ML.UK); “we have to be aware of what we are doing, that we're all part of it not just at work but outside too it is more interconnected somehow, we'll all impact each-other if we don't play our part in it (03.LL.UK).*

The recurring references to being part of a ‘wider whole’ and influencing ‘the wheel’ suggest an understanding of being part of one larger system and their impacts on others (e.g., ‘letting others down’). Within that, leaders frame SL as enabling a holistic integration of people and performance: *“it is all servant-leadership, it's a very much a holistic viewpoint, a wholeness, not just we need to perform, but we need to look after the people, and how can we get the two together for the best possible outcomes for everyone who's involved. Not just the employees, but their community, the customers, the stakeholders, everyone” (12.ML.UK).* Leaders accounts of broadening accountability beyond the organisation to include ‘the whole system’, consistently empathising the holistic nature of SL: *“it's part of the servant-leadership, trying to do your best for all the staff, as they're all part of the community. But as soon as you broaden it out to a wider view, then, you're not just looking at the employee needs but into their family too who are not part of the immediate system but are certainly part of the whole system. And you have to take into account their needs, their feelings” (11.SL.US).*

In that regard, leaders highlight the role of awareness as central to an integrated decision-making: *“we're very interlinked, and I think you always need to look at the bigger picture because if you do not you risk taking decision that are very silo and that can have a detrimental effect on other things. You need to have a look at what else is out there, and not just internally to our company, but also externally in the world really” (26.ML.UK).*

Another middle manager elaborates: *“we need to consider the impact on the team and the*

*individuals within that team and on the wider business, the impact on stakeholders. Um, definitely the community in general, the environment and all the relationships that we have outside with clients, customers, you know, our aim is to make positive memories in everything we do” (18.ML.UK). Leaders also corroborated stakeholder engagement practice as a means for expanding awareness: “We conducted a materiality assessment to understand our tribe and stakeholders’ concerns that are most important to them” (11.SL.US).*

Having awareness of what is ‘*out there*’, was described as central to sustaining organisational culture and ensuring the organisation remains future-focused: “*You know forward thinking and you know making decisions today as if tomorrow matters and that’s the culture that we want to sustain” (01.SL.US); “The world is changing. Uh, different generation, different countries of different needs, many macro socioeconomical trends are out there. And if you don’t consider all of that, and if you don’t look at the future, um, you will not change” (33.ML.NL). As mentioned in theme 4, leaders accounted for change as requiring adaptability at both organisational and individual levels (05.SL.NL; 11.SL.US). Leaders further described getting followers to adapt to systems change: “We had to learn from our mistakes, get people more or less adapting to the new systems put in place, and adjust, keep them informed, all of those experiences make us better because the trials and tribulations help to strengthen our resolve” (01.SL.US).*

This ‘fix and adjust’ approach was viewed to be facilitated by individuals’ ‘adaptive mindset’ (04.ML.BL), gained through situational adaptability training, and viewed as critical for expanding awareness, noted to enhance leaders’ ability to serve’ (e.g., 11.SL.US; 05.SL.NL; 04.ML.BL). This is further explained by this leader, in the context of sustainability: “*there have been definite changes in processes and systems to be more sustainable, but we also use the system of situation adaptability, which helps people become more aware, and to adapt*

*and move forward”* (12.ML.UK). Leaders frame mindset development, in general, as crucial for collective success. One senior leader state: *“Even mindset is really important for us to have in our organisation. We have a bias towards 'we collective' rather than 'individual', and a bias toward purpose-driven behaviours, and before someone even joins the organisation we are seeking to assess those things, once someone is in the organisation, we work really hard to help them understand how their role contributes to our collective success”* (01.SL.US). A ‘we collective mindset’ was also referred to by other leaders as *‘part of whole mindset’* (e.g., 09.CEO.US; 26.ML.UK; 22.SL.UK).

Communication was also stated as central to aligning mindsets: *“I think communication is key, making sure that they are aware of the aim of the strategy so that they have that bigger picture and see how their role works within”* (26.ML.UK). Along sharing ideas, this collective mindset is positioned as essential for informed decision-making and innovative solutions: *“Collaboration and being open to new ideas from any direction is absolutely essential to ensure that the solution or the decisions that are made are well informed”* (01.SL.US). It was also perceived by leaders as helping to expand awareness of best ways of working for individual and business growth: *“we're looking at better ways of working and that we all are involved and engaging in it, we all have to take our own responsibility in that, And that's how we grow as a business, because the business is also impacted as we grow”* (03.LL.UK). This links to theme 2, reinforcing the common view amongst leaders that individual growth leads to company’s growth and success (05.SL.NL), implying that change needs to start at individual-level to translate to change at organisational level.

Additionally, education was equally framed as essential not only to align values, but also mindset, ‘speaking the same language’ (11.SL.US; 04.ML.BL). A senior leader explained: *“We're still in the process of educating our tribe so everyone will have the same knowledge”*

(01.SL.US). Leaders position themselves as responsible for expanding awareness, emphasising the importance of senior leadership buy-in : *“we need to be stewards of the organisation. We will continue to grow and develop that mindset as an organisation. But it has to come from the senior leadership team. If they're not behind it, then it doesn't even get off the ground”* (33.ML.NL). They described leadership modelling behaviours as essential for inspiring alignment: *“To bring to life the culture that supports purpose-driven practices, it has got to be something that is lived every day. So that people experience it and want to be a part of and to contribute to it”* (09.CEO.US). However, in this regard, leaders’ acknowledged gaps in education, especially on sustainability despite being one of the most pressing challenges of modern businesses but positioned it part of their future plan (e.g., 13.LL.UK; 23.LL.NL).

Leaders also acknowledged variation in employee readiness for change: *“some people are very prepared to change, and they are very proactive in changing and to see what is needed to improve. Some others are not that aware. but I think most are open to change and will be able to go where we need to”* (39.ML.IB). This implies that the desire for change must come from within the individual, where having awareness is perceived as foundational for cultivating a ‘right mindset’: *“The person who makes decision must be aware in any situation to always consider am I doing the right thing?... Has to have the right mindset so not to take the wrong decision”* (01.SL.US). Leaders’ accounts suggest that alignment with company’s values is a defined criteria for a ‘right mindset’, crucial for making informed decisions. The one-to-one reviews were previously identified as essential processes to ensure values adherence and to model behaviours (09.CEO.US), enabling leaders to both gain awareness of employees’ needs and competency (04.ML.BL), and to develop employees’ awareness and adaptive mindset, through coaching and ongoing monitoring.

In sum, leaders' accounts portray a leadership culture that strives to consider the interconnectedness of individual roles, organisational goals, and broader stakeholders. Processes such as communication, collaboration, education and reviews were presented as means to developing individuals' awareness and mindset, however, these still appear to operate within a rigid normative framework. While statements about materiality assessments and openness to new ideas from all (01.SL.US) are promising, they lack detailed evidence of how such inputs translate into strategic shifts. The desire to inspire alignment suggest authenticity by many leaders, yet inconsistencies in a few senior leaders' commitment (see theme 4), could cause confusion among employees about what to value, compromising the credibility of the leadership intention.

Conclusively, the gap between aspirational values and structural realities presents an ongoing challenge. Leaders' recognition of these tension, however, signals a degree of self-awareness and a willingness to evolve. The stated focus on "education" and "reality checking" (11.SL.US), suggests a forward-thinking and a desire to equitably embed awareness across all levels of the organisation (13.LL.UK). Yet it remains ambiguous whether it is used to encourage reflexivity and genuine 'long-term change' or to enforce alignment to predefined corporate agenda? Where employees' insight is vital.

#### ***4.6.3. Employee interviews- "accounts of perceived SL behaviour as described by followers"***

The employees' accounts reveal a widespread perception of being part of something bigger than themselves, consistently using phrases that echo leadership language. Such examples include: "*we are part of the whole system, and we all have a part to play. We work a lot together. And we support and motivate each-other*" (07.EM.UK). Another employee

expressed positive feeling about this collective identity: *“we all feel like we're part of it, and part of something bigger. It's great”* (19.EM.IR). These accounts suggest that employees have internalised the "part of whole mindset" (26.ML.UK; 11.SL.US), suggesting that the organisational culture does foster a sense of connection between individuals, teams, the organisation, and beyond.

Employees expressed pride in contributing to the organisation (19.EM.IR), including to the community and environment: *“we are part of the wider community, and it makes me feel good to help others and I care for the environment”* (28.EM.UK). One referenced an organisational initiative: *“The [company] have this new initiative ‘tomorrow's child’. I try and do my bit as we are all sort of part of that big ecosystem, it's very important for the future of our planet”* (27.EM.LX). They also highlighted the perceived value of inclusivity in driving sustainability effort: *“we are as a team focussing on what we can do individually to reduce waste, plastics used on packaging, we all try to do our part to achieve the bigger picture”* (17.EM.UK). This reflects an ethical orientation of their role and impact on the wider system and future generation. They position collaboration as a process to enhancing their awareness, enabling them to see the bigger picture *“it's more of a collaborative field within the company. So, everyone can actually bring ideas to the table, that help us to see the bigger picture”* (14.EM.UK). These accounts not only reflect leadership somehow success in fostering collective responsibility but also demonstrate how SL values are being drawn into employees perceived roles and sense of identity, through processes such as collaboration, reviews, dialogues and trainings.

One employee also demonstrated awareness of conflicting interests when collaborating externally: *“Sometimes we can't collaborate cause it's kind of a conflict of interest...working with different dealers”* (15.EM.UK). This suggests that awareness helps employees to respond adaptively to stakeholders' needs. However, the fact that only a very few employees

expressed understanding of the complexities and trade-offs involved in system-thinking suggests that its internalisation may vary across the organisation.

Employees accounts described a positive perception of leaders' adaptive behaviour, especially in face of change (see Theme 4). They also acknowledge leaders' influence on their own behaviours, citing "leading by example" (e.g., 16.EM.NL; 15.EM.UK), as important to fostering experience, adaptability and resilience (27.EM.LX). Employees also demonstrated leaders' influence on their mindsets (e.g., *thinking differently working with the company (19.EM.IR)-Theme 1*), using wordings that mirrors company's values and leadership specific narratives, such as 'making things better than today', and 'doing the right thing' (17.EM.UK; 16.EM.NL; 25.EM.SP; 35.EM.UK). For instance, one employee stated: "*we all try to do our part to leave a positive lasting impact*" (17.EM.UK), whereas others describe perceiving holistic approaches in their leaders: "*manager focuses on the big picture for the whole business and what it meant for us as a team and for the future*" (16.EM.NL); "*a slow burner but eventually able to see the wider impact*" (41.EM.FR). This suggests internalisation of organisational values, which supports the claim that leadership modelling, a core element of SL, plays a critical role in shaping not only behaviours but employee mindset.

While, in previous themes, employees acknowledged the importance of communication for growth, a few expressed that more is needed (38.EM.UK; 41.EM.FR), especially around CS, like: "*I'm not that much concerned about the social side... We don't speak much about things like sustainability. Maybe we have, but I'm not aware of it*" (41.EM.FR). This lack of consistent, inclusive communication undermines the sense of interdependency that ST and SL advocate. Similar gaps were identified in CS education, framed as essential to expanding awareness: "*No, no trainings so far. But I'd like to learn more about sustainability. Um, it*

*gives you that sort of more awareness of what you are doing, that's particularly bad for the environment for example” (31.EM.NL).*

Employees also accounted for varied interpretations of sustainability, with many describing the social practices, like diversity, community engagements, well-being...etc, as a separate dimension. Their accounts revealed that the common understanding of CS is through an environmental lens, like one asked: *“are we talking about sustainability from an environmental perspective or like work sustainability to avoid burnout amongst the employees?” (27.EM.LX).* This indicates a departmentalised sustainability knowledge (environmental), which contrasts with SL and ST’s holistic nature. These gaps in processes are significant as they can limit systems learning and awareness, questioning employees’ critical engagement with ST, beyond internalisation of leadership narratives.

However, employees validated being included in stakeholder feedback: *“the CEO went to get everybody's feedback on the ESG issues... to look at better processes, to all work together to make this happen” (14.EM.UK).* This also corroborate company and leaders’ accounts of looking to ‘optimise’ processes and systems to achieve a unified lens across all regions (ESG, 2022). These, along with accounts of collaborative and idea-sharing practices, suggest some degree of empowerment in sustainability efforts (albeit siloed efforts e.g., cleaning weed in the seaside/ volunteering for community work/one off DEI+B program).

However, while employees largely affirmed the collaborative nature of the organisational culture, and validated inclusion in stakeholder assessment, it is still unclear how this feedback is used to influence decisions or reshape organisational systems, or whether they are used as merely diagnostic tools. The emphasis on aligned values and mindset, may reflect genuine internalisation but could also suggest subtle pressure to adopt a globally unified organisational narrative, that shapes how employees understand their role and identity. This

could limit local contextual diversity and divergent innovative insights, essential to developing the aspired 'ESG awareness' (01.SL.US; ESG, 2020).

Many employees' accounts also revealed gaps in education and communication, with siloed knowledge of a complex modern challenge such as sustainability, despite company's claim of integrated ESG governance, indicating a lack of shared conceptual understanding despite consistency in language. This suggests that while the organisation aspires to a collaborative systemic transformation to philanthropy, implementation remains inconsistent with employees lived experiences. In all, this limited evidence of employees' critical engagement and holistic education, highlight the challenges of a pure SL approach to foster a robust 'systemic transformation'.

## **4.7. Executive Summary**

Participants reported a generally positive experience of leadership, community support, belonging and purpose-driven culture, that align with the company's SL values of care, inclusion, and service. Many described these practices as not only fostering workplace commitment but extend to shaping their contributions to environmental and wider community causes. These accounts indicate that SL principles are not merely rhetorical but largely lived. On the other side, closer analysis, suggests that ST within the organisation may be more rhetorical than intensely applied, with narratives predominantly, reflecting community-building practices rather than deeply embedded systems thinking practices.

Participants mainly expressed feelings of connection, support and belonging within a cohesive environment, reflecting shared identity and relational qualities of being part of a team or wider community (e.g., 26.ML.UK; 05.SL.NL; 07.EM.UK; 35.EM.UK). While this

supports servant-leadership's focus on service, psychological safety and community-building, it is less indicative of rigorous engagement with ST's elements like feedback loops, emergence, or systemic root causality. Statements like: 'we care for each-other' (04.ML.BL) 'makes me feel good to help others' (14.EM.UK), 'I care for the environment' (28.EM.UK), tend to centre around emotional satisfaction rather than strategic, analytical thinking about systems. Even examples of employee-led sustainability efforts, describe siloed, individual or team-level contributions (e.g., reducing plastic packaging or helping the community), rather than larger systemic interventions.

Leaders also tend to emphasise belonging, alignment and standardisation without reference to feedback loops, cause-effect relationships, or identifying leverage points for contextual adaptability, typical terms of systems thinking applications. Mechanisms such as materiality assessments and global listening tours, though designed to include a range of stakeholder perspectives, lack transparency in how feedback tangibly informs or reshapes organisational structures. Thus, the extent of influence both internal and external communities' have on the company's values and strategic areas remains a critical area for reflection, especially, in relation to normative control and power structure. The plan to influence unified values and mindset across all regions (11.SL.US), further reveal a strong push towards global normative cohesion rather than embracing diversity of thought or addressing structural tensions, like fragmentations in the tribal community, disparities in power highlighted in separate leadership office structure, and the long-serving seniors still holding onto traditional hierarchical power, creating more entrenchment and fragmentation- 'mini tribes' within the tribe.

In all, while the organisation has largely promoted a sense of 'we' identity, purpose, and CS-oriented engagement, participants lived experiences indicate that it may still have not yet

fully translated systems rhetorics or ‘systemic awareness’ into a deep application at individual level. At organisational level, the company demonstrated theoretical awareness of systems complexity (needing different strokes for different folks (ESG, 2020; CEO Boor, 2009)), but implementation tends toward influencing alignment, standardisation and unified mindset across regions (ESG, 2022; 01.SL.US), reflecting a situational rather than contextual adaptability practice, which further highlights SL’s systemic vulnerability. This reveals that while SL creates strong relational and ethical foundations for community-oriented responsibility, on its own though, it may fall short in fostering analytical and systems-aware practices that enables contextual adaptability and navigating modern day complexities such as of corporate sustainability challenges.

A corporate sustainability integration requires adapting internal systems and processes at every level, which aligns with ST’s goal to innovate systems for better outcomes and SL’s focus on developing and empowering individuals to contribute and adapt. Thus, analysing how CS is integrated across all levels and regions organisational-wide, would shed more light on whether SL is fostering a truly holistic, systems-aware leadership or simply reinforcing values without contextual-sensitive structural change. This would allow for more theoretical elaborations on how ST principles can strengthen SL processes to evolve into an adaptive, systemic servant leadership. Accordingly, the next chapter concludes the findings with an analysis of the underlying processes most frequently associated with the six presented ‘accounted behavioural’ themes revealed from participant descriptions of ways of working.

Four critical processes stood out as most frequently mentioned as important across the three dataset, namely: communication, education, collaboration and reviews. These reflect the way the themes come together in practice within the organisation, allowing for a critical theoretical elaboration on how an ST lens can enhance traditional organisational processes to

contribute to a more systemic, sustainable implementation of SL, that is better equipped to navigate complexities. The four systemic processes presented next, namely: Integrative Communication, Adaptive Learning, Systemic Innovative Collaboration, and Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation, reflect the product of such SL/ST theoretical integration.

## **Chapter 5 - Part 2: The Process of Change**

### **5. Introduction**

The analysis focuses next on ‘how’ SL is enacted in the organisation. While the preceding chapter established themes of accounted behaviours, this section examines how these converge to reveal the interplay between SL and ST, within the context of corporate sustainability (CS). This offers important setting for analysing the effectiveness of SL implementation through an ST lens, within complex global environments. CS inherently requires long-term, interconnected thinking that holistically considers the needs of diverse stakeholders across environmental, social, and economic domains. Thus, it aims to contribute to answering sub-research questions 2 and 3:

*2). How can systems thinking help clarify the key elements and processes required for the successful implementation of servant-leadership?*

*3). To what extent can a systematic implementation of servant-leadership facilitate organisational-level corporate sustainability?*

SL distinctly focus on serving others and fostering collective growth, which aligns with sustainability’s aims, but SL’s real test lies in how well it embraces systemic awareness, complexities and adaptability across regions. Analysing how sustainability is communicated,

embedded, and acted upon, would help to reveal whether SL is fostering a truly holistic, systems-aware leadership or is simply reinforcing values without genuine contextual-sensitive structural change.

## **5.1. The Underlying Processes**

This section delves deeper into ‘how’ CS is embedded and acted upon across regions, to critically evaluate how well the organisation incorporates ST into its servant-oriented practices. This would assist in understanding how ST can strengthen SL, enabling a critical ST-informed theoretical elaboration of the traditional 4 main processes that emerged from the interplay of the previous themes (communication, learning, collaboration and reviews) into processes that could foster a sustainable systemic SL implementation. Particularly, those that meaningfully supports systemic awareness, contextual adaptability, and cross-regional learning. This led to theoretically defining four systemic processes, namely: Integrative Communication, Adaptive Learning, Systemic Innovative Collaboration and Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation. A holistic analysis of each process is presented next.

### **5.1.1. Integrative Communication**

Based on the data, communication is theorised as a central SL process, perceived as foundational for values alignment, community-building, and follower engagement. It was described as an important ‘tribal’ concept, that helps support “partnering for success” (CEO Book, 2009, p. 52), and to develop and empower followers: “*Open communication fits with the philosophy of how we partner for performance with our people and empowers them*” (39.ML.IB). Documents frame dialogues as a moral and strategic imperative, in a sense of being ‘*true to their values*’ (p.9), in guiding individuals: “*transparency and a simple vision. If people can't see where we're going, how are they going to get there?*” (09.CEO.US).

These communicative practices were perceived to build trusting relations, and to create a safe, close-knit environment, where employees can have a voice: *“openness with the team can breed trust and healthy dialogue and ideas that can help improve our job roles and progress”* (03.LL.UK). Employees corroborated feeling heard, included, and valued (see e.g., 02.EM.US; 07.EM.UK). These accounts indicate that communication is not only a relational tool, but also instrumental in empowering and aligning individuals with company’s SL values, purpose and strategies.

Many leaders expressed that communication is one of the main characteristics of servant-leaders, enabling them to get employees engaged, not only through listening but also as a means to influence and persuade them along: *“I think servant leaders need to be very clear in communicating decisions and goals, being able to influence people, to persuade them”* (39.ML.IB) ; *“if you’ve communicated effectively about the vision and decision, the reasons why you’ve made the decision, then you should get everybody on board”* (05.SL.NL). It was also described as ‘key’, in terms of clarifying roles and expectations (26.ML.UK). Many employees’ validated leaders’ statements: *“ [manage] is fully consistent with the information that they give us. So, we are aware of the main goals”* (08.EM.UK); *“quite open about the plans that are concrete and the plans that are expected”* (31.EM.NL). Even true, in relation to CS: *“ they’re also very transparent in their ESG goals...where we all feel like we’re part of it”* (36.EM.BL). However, the consistent emphasis on shared language, aligned values and “getting everyone on board” still points to a push for normative cohesion, risking confiding SL’s persuasion with subtle coercion, driven by strict values alignment.

ESG reports also states that engaging stakeholders, internal and external, in meaningful communication and listening intently to their opinions, is crucial for identifying common objectives and emerging concerns that inform the strategy (ESG, 2022, p.7, p.9, p.11).

Leaders accounted for dialogues as important parts of the company’s coaching culture and

situational adaptability (see e.g., 29.ML.US; 04.ML.BL; 05.SL.NL; 11.SL.US), that supports “*meaningful work*” (CEO Book, 2009, p.32). It was described as key to fostering learning and growth opportunities, that enable everyone to “*make a difference*” through their impact on the well-being of the tribe and their communities (CEO Book, 2009, p.32–33). Many employees affirmed these extra-role practices: “*if an employee had a strong opinion about say sustainability and how we could improve it, the company would definitely listen*” (12.EM.UK). This indicates efforts to promote stakeholder engagement, but it remains unclear to what extent this feedback reshapes systemic structures or decision-making processes (see chapter 4).

Communication was further positioned as crucial to ‘expand their ESG awareness’ across all the business regions (ESG, 2020, p.47), believed to have made them more aware of ‘many issues’, such as of stakeholders’ concerns, their most significant impacts, and best practices out there amongst other pioneering companies (p.48). In this respect, the company documented a holistic approach, with ESG reports emphasising the integration of ‘environmental, social, as well as the economic’ aspects of the business (ESG, 2020, p.7). It also acknowledges that ‘the pace of change’ that drives an interest in sustainability ‘differs globally’, both within their business and in the wider societies they operate in (p.58), suggesting awareness of regional variation. In response, they plan to align a ‘sustainability mindset’ across all regions (p.4).

This difference in sustainability drivers also emerged from the data (end 2023), revealing inconsistencies in sustainability interest and communications across regions. For instance, in UK, employees expressed more interest and encouragement towards sustainability, despite limited communication: “*I’ve always been a bit more of an environmental conscious and I think I’m more encouraged here... we have information about sustainability in our company’s intranet*” (17.EM.UK); “*I mean looking from events so far, not that much*

*communications, but there's lots of information available on our company's intranet if you're really interested in sustainability” (08.EM.UK); in France: “I'm not that much concerned about the social side... We don't speak much about things like sustainability. Maybe we have, but I'm not aware of it” (41.EM.FR); in Netherlands: “I think they probably perhaps do send email through about sustainability, um, it's not something that I recall seeing. I know that we do have the sustainability report on our website” ( 31.EM.NL).*

These inconsistencies show no clear advancement yet in sustainability mindset or drivers over the 3 years+ since they declared a unified SL/CS mindset and increased stakeholder communication commitment (ESG, 2020), raising questions about the depth of the claimed ‘systemic’ approach to sustainability. The company's aligned tribal framework itself, while promoting community-building, may also be limiting ST’s potential by emphasising cultural homogeneity over diverse perspectives, essential for systems innovation. The CEO described the impact of communication on the tribal culture, as involving a tribe leader sitting around a fire, ‘*sharing their knowledge*’ with younger tribe members (2009, p.31). This metaphor, while describing a close leader/ follower relation, it also suggests a top-down knowledge transmission rather than co-creation. The previously noted language alignment between leaders and employees (Chapter 4), may reflect this transmission as internalisation rather than an independent conceptual development.

Furthermore, while many expressed positive perceptions of communication, a few employees reported shortcomings, as found in Chapter 4, feeling more can be done to improve it (e.g., 17.EM.UK; 35.EM.UK). On a larger scale, some leaders also noted gaps in top-down as well as cross-regional/ functional communication: “*people that are involved in research and development will discuss sustainability with higher up people and potential changes in the future. But I'm not directly involved in it, so I don't have that much information on how the process is. It's not something I've ever been asked*” (20.LL.UK); “*communication from the*

*very senior leadership could be better, and particularly between the different regions and parts of the business. That's something that we struggle with*" (18.ML.UK). This suggests more of a siloed communication process, contradicting ST's emphasis on interconnectedness. This further indicates that ESG decisions are mainly designed from the top with the exclusive involvement of the designated R&D specialists, then transmitted down to be internalised, enforcing the risk of ST being used as more of a diagnostic tool to inform the strategy and refine processes (ESG, 2020), rather than as an integrative tool to co-designing them with employees/ stakeholders.

The company did acknowledge gaps in communication in their 2020 ESG report, stating that they have not 'adequately communicated' how living their values is 'resonant' with practices increasingly referred to under the E.S.G 'umbrella' (ESG, 2020, p.11). They declared along with unifying sustainability mindsets, a commitment to prioritise communicating 'ESG priorities' with all stakeholders, especially, how these 'connect' with their values (ESG, 2020, p.18). Yet, still, the emphasis is on aligning and reinforcing the importance of corporate values, rather than on integrating different perspectives and co-creation. Moreover, despite emphasising the need for an ESG awareness (ESG, 2020), more than 3 years on (at the time of data collection), employees reported fragmented understanding of sustainability, rather than viewing it as interconnected aspects of a single system (e.g., environmentalism, (27.EM.LX). One leader indirectly confirmed that this gap persists: "*I think where we fold in the sustainability front is that we're not very good at communicating sustainability externally*" (33.ML.NL), revealing gaps in aspirational systems awareness vs. operational realities and deeper application.

However, the company recognised that while they have made progress, they still have 'a long way to go', being a large international organisation (ESG, 2022, p.26). Some participants conceded, acknowledging size and market volatility as constraints: "*working in multinational*

*organisations such as this, in volatile markets, sometimes it's just difficult to include everyone” (10.ML.LX); “Communication is usually top down. But we understand that it is a big company with many departments so communication can be slow sometimes” (19.EM.IR).*

The current top-down traditional approach to communication reveals complexity in maintaining consistency and responsiveness across regions. This highlights structural barriers that may constrain the scalability of SL principles. Siloed or slow communication can undermine SL’s principles like awareness, responsiveness, and community, by limiting leaders’ ability to remain aware of systemic and local issues, maintain global relations, and adaptively serve the needs of the broader community according to context and situation (ESG, 2020, p.7). From a theoretical perspective, this reveals limitations in how SL principles translate into practice, at scale. While SL emphasises awareness and listening, accounts suggest that the organisation's communicative practices may not be sufficiently structured to capture systemic/ contextual complexities.

At the organisational level, communication serves to promote SL accounted behaviours (e.g., developing and supporting others, community-building, adapting serving), by ‘tailoring’ leadership styles to situations (CEO Book, 2009, p.55; Chapter 4), encouraging engagement, and strengthening shared purpose. Yet, from a systems thinking perspective, its potential to drive contextual, structural, and systems-level transformation remains constrained.

Communication practices, as described by participants, appear to operate more as mechanisms of cultural normative cohesion, rather than to embrace systemic complexity or decentralised decision-making. The company recognises regional variations in the pace of change and the need for expanded ESG awareness globally, indicating an acknowledgement of this limitation, yet the proposed solutions mainly prioritise standardisation rather adaptability. The company's communicative practices show some efforts toward inclusion; stakeholder input is sought and valued (ESG, 2022, p.7), but the emphasis on refining

predetermined strategies/ systems rather than fundamentally reshaping those systems (ESG, 2020, 2020) suggests limitations in how deeply ST informs organisational SL practices.

Overall, the data reveal a critical tension within traditional communication practices: communication is experienced both as healthy dialogue and as a subtle form of coercion, often functioning as top-down transmission that may inadvertently reinforce normative control, power imbalances, and regional inconsistencies. This raises a broader concern about the effectiveness of the systemic structures and mechanisms necessary to embed SL meaningfully and equitably throughout the organisation; questioning whether current mechanisms merely reinforce surface-level alignment without enabling deeper, systemic transformation. From a systems thinking perspective, if these issues remain unaddressed, they could pose significant barriers to the sustained implementation of servant-leadership. As indicated in the following accounts: *“It’s open and transparent. But the feel of it sometimes, it’s not like that’s what we’re doing. It’s not direct. It feels like you can go around the circles”* (03.LL.UK); *“We feel that there’s actually clarity and focus sometimes, but other times there’s an apprehension of what is behind the scenes”* (16.EM.NL).

These accounts suggest a dissonance between the organisation’s stated values of openness and the actual experience of communication in practice, revealing deeper concerns about authenticity and inclusion. While seemingly transparent and accessible, the structure and coordination of communication often appear inconsistent and fragmented, risking engendering uncertainty, apprehension and ambiguity, particularly across regions where employees may feel disconnected from decision-making processes and unsure of what is happening. As one employee noted, *“sometimes it feels less coordinated, and it feels very much like the decisions are made without you sometimes”* (20.LL.UK). This indicates that communication may lack the systemic depth needed to ensure real inclusion and clarity. Such lack of structure and consistency risks reinforcing siloed thinking and weakens the feedback

loops essential to a systemically informed leadership framework. Without structured mechanisms for multi-directional dialogue, feedback, and integration, communication risks becoming more about compliance and alignment than about true engagement, limiting the organisation's capacity to embed SL meaningfully and adaptively.

From a theoretical perspective, this limitation calls for a more *Integrative Communication* process- one that not only transmits values but connects all parts of the system in a multi-directional, participatory manner. Such a process should align diverse perspectives, promotes shared understanding, enable systems awareness, and facilitate inclusive, adaptive learning.

### **5.1.2. Adaptive Learning**

The company identifies itself as a “learning and teaching” organisation and asserts that without such a foundational culture, it would struggle to innovate, scale economically, or build a sustainable future (ESG, 2020, p.18). It further stresses that learning enables to build an inclusive, safe, purpose-driven environment that values employees' input, and ‘learning moments’ (see theme 2). Employees are said to be given freedom to learn from mistakes and choose their growth path through “self-selection” programs, perceived to foster autonomy and psychological safety, empowering individuals to take control of “*their own destiny*” (ESG, 2020, p.21).

To foster their learning culture, the company reported setting up a “Learning Laboratory” designed to serve both internal and external communities, including non-profits, local schools and youth centre, as part of their *‘paying it forward’* legacy. Training in SL is extended to global partners' leaders and stakeholders worldwide (e.g., cans producers, distributors and suppliers). This is aimed at aligning stakeholders on SL practices, working collectively to create positive “*economic, environmental, and social value*” (ESG, 2022, p.18). Such

inclusive education is framed as the fuel for *continual improvement* and as a process to build communities both inside and outside the business (ESG 2020, p.5). While this aligns with SL's development, and community-building, it raises questions about whether it sufficiently develops systems thinking capabilities.

Learning is positioned as a central mechanism enabling 'support and development' practices (see Chapter 4/ theme 2) and "*a greater sense of awareness*" of individual needs and differences beyond the organisation (09.CEO.US; 11.SL.US; ESG, 2020). For instance, trainings such as on situational adaptability were perceived to facilitate tailored service and shared responsibility (ESG, 2020, p. 21; 20.LL.UK). "*Risk Management*" program, is said to educate the tribe on the "*proper and ethical*" practices for managing "*risks and conflicts of interests*" (ESG, 2020, p.63). Through this integrative learning, employees are expected to develop accountability not only for their own growth but also for the "*ESG aspects*" and impacts of their actions and of the business on "*stakeholders*" (ESG, 2022, p.19). This approach positions education as facilitating awareness; however, the focus appears to be on ethical management of existing systems rather than critical analysis of those systems.

The aim, as stated by the company is to build a strong bench of "*future servant leaders*" (ESG, 2022, p.18), who not only create economic value, but also strive to make the "*world a better place*" (CEO book, 2009, p. 47). Leaders elaborated that: "*once you develop one servant leader you see the benefits of it later. Because if I can help them grow to become the best version of themselves, those leaders get inspired to help others*" (18.ML.UK).

However, the process is said to start by recruiting "*the right people with similar values and a passion to learn*" (01.SL.US), because as explained by another leader: "*We can always try to teach them to do the job, it's more important to have aligned values, then you can easily teach them how they can become servant leaders*" (05.SL.NL). The persistent emphasis on

“alignment” may point to pressures for global uniformity, which contradict ST’s contextual and nuanced approach.

Through aligning values and objectives, and ‘*leadership involvement*’ (p.17), the company believes they should develop cohesive, global ESG actions that will contribute to a sustainable world (p.2). The aim, is to proudly leave an *enduring, sustainable business* for the next generation, using their SL values as a decision-making ‘filter’ to protect long-term stakeholder interests (ESG, 2022, p.9). Company’s plan is to develop internal “*talents and capabilities*” to pursue its ESG objectives (ESG, 2022, p.18), focusing primarily on “*R&D and Innovation*” (ESG, 2020, p.45). The company affirmed that focusing on innovation includes bringing sustainability into action through learning (ESG, 2022, p.54). It declared taking ‘*a holistic approach*’ to innovation, perceived as essential to embed new ways of thinking across global regions, pinned as ‘innovative thinking’ (p.45). However, the emphasis on values-aligned recruitment (05.SL.NL) suggests an initial normative filter which may limit the diversity of perspectives and the potential for versatile innovations, talents, and ‘innovative thinking’.

Additionally, as previously noted, many participants confirmed shortcomings in sustainability education: “*introducing more educational programs are needed to inform employees on all aspects of sustainability*” (13.LL.UK), which, according to employees, helps them gain awareness of their actions (17.EM.UK). More than 3 years passed since their FY20 assessments feedback, yet the senior ESG leader admitted that they are “*still in the process of educating our tribe*” (11.SL.US). Although the company frames CS as an integrated system of social, environmental, and economic dimensions (ESG, 2020, p.7), internal understanding remains fragmented (27.EM.LX). Acknowledging this gap through their FY20 stakeholder assessment, the need for a global unified ‘mindset’ is thus presented as a priority (ESG, 2022,

p.56). According to leaders this is crucial as *“like many of them [employees] still think that for the plant-based formula we're good to go and it is not the case”* (11.SL.US).

Education is described as a necessary condition for developing “internal capabilities” for innovation (ESG, 2022, p.18), and as a means to ‘embed’ a sustainability mindset into strategy and global systems (p.10). According to the company, their FY20 assessment revealed that creating a global systemic transformation towards CS, requires an aligned individual and cultural mindset. As elaborated by this leader: *“we need to continue to educate employees around the world, so they have the same information and if they have the same mindset, then they'll make better decisions”* (01.SL.US). Yet, education remains more focused on alignment which may conflict with ST’s inherent emphasis on diverse perspectives as sources of innovation. This standardisation approach may reflect SL’s emphasis on clarity and shared vision but may overlook ST’s focus on complexity and emergence, especially if communication remains largely one-sided, top-down and inconsistent, which could further undermine innovative thinking.

Additionally, the company declared intentions to incorporate accountability for educating and influencing individual mindset, into the leaders’ role (ESG, 2022). Leaders confirmed this claim with experienced examples: *“\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\* is a new sustainability project led by the top director in Europe and he's reaching out to all of us to volunteer for it... I think one way that he is attempting to infiltrate it in every part of our business at every level, every department, every country, is by training the internal teams”* (10.ML.LX). This was also corroborated by employees: *“our manager was talking about training on the new concept of 'tomorrow's child' in our team... They are like showing by example”* (15.EM.UK). These statements suggest initial efforts to carry out the plans for more education and alignment on sustainability, enhanced by role modelling (15.EM.UK). However, the actual educational

initiatives remain top-down in both design and delivery, with leaders positioned as primary drivers of change.

The company links learning directly with adaptability in dealing with ‘long-term change’ (ESG, 2022, p.37), as validated by participants: *“We have a lot of mandatory training courses that we need to take as change happens continuously so we’re abreast on what’s happening around”* (14.EM.UK); *“we also have situation adaptability courses, which help people to adapt to changes and move forward”* (12.ML.UK). The CEO stresses the need to *“make learning inclusive and evolutionary”* (09.CEO.US), especially as the company is committed to ‘transformational CS’ (ESG, 2022, p.37). Such evolutionary education is positioned as enabling the organisation to ‘stay adaptive’ and to keep ‘constantly evolving’ working toward the future (CEO Book, 2009, p.34). A view also shared by employees: *“the company is quite adaptive, we’re constantly evolving...we’re all quite good at constantly learning and developing”* (42.EM.NL).

However, while the company recognised that a new applied innovative thinking to processes and systems is necessary for organisational-level sustainability, there is limited evidence of fundamental structural changes to power dynamics or decision-making processes. The emphasis appears to be on adapting to predetermined changes (01.SL.US), with education aimed at helping people adapt and adjust to systems rather than co-creating them. The company acknowledged that more groundwork, education, and training needs to be done to get people more engaged in CS (ESG, 2022, p.58), suggesting awareness of the limitations of current approaches. Yet, it maintains focus on motivation and alignment rather than embracing divergent local perspectives.

In sum, the company's commitment to education and innovation reflects an aspiration toward 'systemic long-term change', but its implementation reveals tensions between its commitment to adaptability and the drive to standardise knowledge and mindsets. These challenges suggest limitations in how SL translates into systemic practice: while the current SL approach offers ethical and relational frameworks for sustainability, it appears insufficient for developing the analytical depth and structural agility needed for global, context-sensitive transformation. To realise SL's transformational potential, it should be supported by a more robust emancipatory learning process, in order to evolve into a leadership capable of navigating complexity and contextual adaptability beyond mere normative alignment. Current learning process has largely facilitated alignment and engagement, but it too must evolve into an adaptive learning process that promotes distributed, critical systems literacy needed to achieve this aspired evolutionary learning and change. Especially, since the company aims to maintain this aligned sustainability "*mindset and practices*", through enhancing '*collaborative approaches*' (ESG, 2022, p.8), as presented next.

### **5.1.3. Systemic Innovative Collaboration**

Participants described the workplace as becoming "*more of a collaborative field within the company*" (14.EM.UK).

Collaboration was viewed by both leaders and employees to create a safe, supportive environment, where teamwork, ideas sharing and interaction are much encouraged (39.ML.IB; 14.EM.UK; 19.EM.IR;30.EM.UK). It was described as foundational to their 'partnering for success' approach, where leaders are perceived by employees as '*work[ing] collaboratively with their team*' (02.EM.US), to achieve individual, team and organisational goals (e.g., 08.EM.UK; 16.EM.NL). The company states that collaborative relationships

promote open dialogues and aligned purpose, with leadership framed as a shared process between leaders and direct reports (CEO Book, 2009, p.8). The CEO explains that within this partnership both parties have an opportunity to influence each other: *“it's all about 'we'”* (09.CEO.US). Yet, as previously highlighted, the influence seems more top-down and mainly geared towards alignment on values and predefined organisational goals rather than co-creation : *“Sometimes it's like these are the decisions. These are the goals you need to reach. Just deal with it. That's fine, I think for me we're on the mutual understanding that sometimes it maybe not be ideal, but this is the situation. So, we kind of work with it together in that way”* (02.EM.US); *“We get goals that are clearly communicated because we have more to say, but you'll get mutual support and help when needed”* (32.EM.LX).

Participants statements reflect a form of adaptive compliance rather than participatory involvement, where engagement is permitted within the boundaries of already defined strategies. This notion is reinforced by the leaders: *“We set the targets and goals and then get teams on board to achieve the journey”* (04.ML.BL), confirming that while support or asking for suggestions may follow, strategic direction is still pre-set.

Collaboration was also stressed as a crucial part of ‘community-building’, described as *“helped to build team relationship”* (14.EM.UK). The ‘all about 'we', ‘we collective’ and ‘part of the whole’ mindsets, were said to be promoted on collaborative approaches, perceived to foster employee development, trust and innovative solutions (01.SL.US; 33.ML.NL; 28.EM.UK; 16.EM.NL). This, in addition to enhancing motivation and engagement (01.SL.US; 22.SL.UK; 07.EM.UK), and facilitating role distribution: *“we work closely together, making sure they[employees] understand how their work contribution fits into the bigger picture and contributes to the ESG strategy”* (04.ML.BL and e.g., 17.EM.UK; 40.EM.FR).

Collaboration was also described as essential for optimising systems and processes, prioritising time, resources and technology (ESG, 2022, p.9, p.47): “*Collaborations for better technology as well ... the more you can automate and innovate processes, the more time you have to dedicate on improving things*” (26.ML.UK); “*We need smart science to guide our CS behaviours and systems, so we also collaborate with our various innovation partners*” (22.SL.UK). It was perceived as key to ‘maintaining a sustainability mindset’ and ‘adapting systems and behaviours’ across global regions (ESG, 2022, p.47). By integrating stakeholder input and soliciting innovative ideas, the company stated that they are taking a ‘*systemic collaborative approach towards long/term change*’ (ESG, 2020, p.32). This suggests a theoretical aspiration to embed a systems approach into its processes, but it remains unclear what mechanisms exist, or what the company plans to implement as strategies for contextual-sensitive adaptation of practices across regions.

One thing was clear though, is that values alignment was positioned as a central condition for collaborative relationships: “*We foster a strong culture of learning and accountability in a collaborative, team environment, and we seek people who have similar values*” (10.ML.LX). The company's SL values framework theoretically supports holistic collaborative thinking, as a means to serve wider stakeholders, suggesting awareness of others’ needs which aligns with CS’s holistic demand: Value #1 reflecting a commitment to collective efforts towards better serving the tribe and stakeholders, according to situation, and value #3, which promotes soliciting ideas and solutions from all (ESG, 2020, p.5). According to leaders, “*servicing others means you have to work with people*” (11.SL.US).

Participants viewed collaboration as crucial to their sustainability efforts: “*sustainability is a collaborative effort, where everybody is involved*” (03.LL.UK); perceived to help them “*achieve the bigger picture*” (14.EM.UK). Many participants from both groups shared their experiences on ways they are collaborating to advance CS initiatives, such as: “*I was*

*working on a new environmental scoring system for some of our products, and the whole organisation got involved, like Paris and Montreal bases” (20.LL.UK); “I recently was tasked to organise a volunteer day for the team... It was pretty much a collaborative effort” (14.EM.UK).*

Collaboration was further framed as a tool for stakeholder integration and innovation, as per this leader: *“maybe sometimes there are opportunities that we don't know of” (39.ML.IB).* They acknowledged that they *“cannot solve the ESG challenge, by themselves” (11.SL.US)* and that addressing pressing CS issues requires the synergised efforts of manufacturers, suppliers, customers and other stakeholders working in collaboration (ESG, 2022, p.52; 22.SL.UK). Leaders further elaborated on this: *“we work a lot with our stakeholders, volunteering, getting new apprentices in, having those relationships with local ecology groups and the universities and the schools locally” (26.ML.UK); “we are focussing on what we can do to reduce waste plastics used on packaging. This is done in-house and externally with third-party innovation partners” (14.EM.UK).*

This ethos of mutual collaboration, both internally and with externally, is further reflected in company's Value #2, which focuses on creating positive lasting relationships, elaborated on as: *“one of the things that we always talk about in sustainability, is the importance of having friends and we consider all our stakeholders to be our friends” (12.ML.UK); “it's good to also look outside for partners that could help us move forward to achieve our goals” (39.ML.IB).* Collaboration was, thus, also perceived to strengthen external community bond: *“It raises our sustainability efforts and really creates those connections” (26.ML.UK).* This theoretical recognition of interdependence aligns with ST and CS focus on shared value to holistically tackle sustainability issues. However, collaboration was said to be difficult sometimes due to cost, time and conflicts: *“there are obviously cost and time implications, involved in the collective sustainability efforts” (39.ML.IB); “competitive stakeholders*

...*conflict of interest*” (19.EM.IR). While this suggest awareness of stakeholder tensions, no concrete, transparent systemic framework was offered for directly reconciling them, rather than stressing on standardisation and shared purpose, with collaboration described as a way of aligning values and adding innovative value (11.SL.US).

First, this alignment was mentioned as part of their inclusive SL training (ESG, 2020, see ‘Adaptive learning’ process). Additionally, the company stresses that external partners are required to ‘*comply*’ with their ‘*Code of Conduct*’, to ‘ensure’ they are ‘aligned’ with their values and commitment to ‘ethical behaviour’ (ESG, 2022, p.17). This was validated by many leaders stating examples like: “*We have recently invested a lot of time and resources to get our partners and other stakeholders onto the new framework around more sustainable friendly production*” (20.LL.UK). This approach theoretically aligns with both SL's core focus on service to others and CS's recognition of stakeholder inclusion. However, the emphasis on compliance with their ‘values and Code of Conduct’, may suggest a stronger one-way influence, which again appears directed towards standardisation.

This was also highlighted in their partners selection criteria, internally, with a values-aligned pre-recruitment filter. Externally, partners are selected primarily on aligned values criteria, and then for their added innovative value to the business: “*we are very selective about what organisations we work with because there's not a lot of extra time to spend working with outside organisations that do not add value to our sustainability efforts*” (11.TL.US). Many participants gave examples of such selective collaborations, that would add value mostly to their R&D and innovation goals: “*We've got some ideas and our studies so far are somewhat encouraging, but we also need collaboration with selected R&D partners for the changes to happen*”(01.SL.US); “*We're going to be working with a company called \*\*\* to reduce packaging, less time production, less raw materials and cost-effective; “we are looking at addressing our processes and minimise our environmental impact*” (18.ML.UK; 39.ML.IB).

Overall, collaboration is positioned as central to fostering a ‘we’ mindset, engagement and collective problem-solving. The company's accounts demonstrate theoretical awareness of the need for stakeholders’ integration and concerted efforts for addressing sustainability challenges. This collaborative intent is demonstrated in their partnerships with various innovation partners that add value to their strategies. Yet, the analysis reveals that this collaborative intent is also constrained by structural and normative considerations. The implementation of collaboration appears more oriented toward alignment and standardisation than toward embracing the diversity and emergence of innovative thinking that characterise robust systems thinking.

The emphasis on selecting external partners based on their ability to add value to sustainability efforts (ESG, 2022), requiring them to align with their code of conduct, suggests that collaboration is filtered through a performance relevance and normative lens. This may support values and operations consistency but could also be restricting dialogue and diverse critical engagement (core tenets of ST) from stakeholders who operate outside of the organisation’s normative framework, undermining communication and emergent learning. These dynamics raise questions about the extent to which servant-leadership is enabling shared authority or is instead potentially reinforcing a performative alignment under the guise of empowerment. On a larger scale, it may also be reinforcing existing power structures rather than a co-creation of systemic change.

Furthermore, the company’s documents and participants’ examples indicated a focus on specific CS issues relating to impact reduction, like ‘emission, plastics waste and packaging’, and on optimising relevant processes, rather than systemic redesign. This further suggests potential for incremental improvements rather than transformative systemic innovation, which while pragmatic, may constrain the organisation's ability to address the root causes of CS challenges that often lie in complex system dynamics rather than isolated issues. As such,

current collaboration may support SL's emphasis on development, community and engagement but may not be sufficient in enabling the deeper systems awareness and structural adaptability that complex sustainability challenges require.

From a systems thinking lens, this highlights a gap between espoused inclusivity and enacted structures, suggesting the need for processes that genuinely distribute influence, embrace dissent, and invite collective sense-making and creation. As such, while the company demonstrates theoretical awareness of ST through its collaborative approach to CS, the critical analysis indicate that SL's role remains mainly normative, lacking the needed analytical depth for context-sensitive restructuring of systems, particularly, when partner interests diverge and conflict. However, this also reveals opportunities for a deeper integration of ST principles that may complement SL collaborative and innovative processes, with tools that could enhance the organisation's capacity to understand, navigate, and transform complex systems; theoretically, framing systemic innovative collaboration as a promising systemic SL process. The company declares a commitment to maintaining 'aligned mindset and practice' through a robust framework of policies, reporting, and ongoing discussion (ESG, 2022, p.8). As such, the opportunity exists to build upon this framework, by incorporating deeper ST principles into its communication, learning and collaborative mechanisms, supported by a more inclusive monitoring and evaluation process, as presented next.

#### **5.1.4. Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation**

Based on participants' accounts, the performance review process is presented as a mechanism for enacting multiple SL behaviours simultaneously.

Quarterly and yearly one-to-one reviews conducted by leaders are described as tools to assess employee ongoing growth, and personal needs, creating spaces for support and development

(book, 2009, p.51). This individualised approach it said to enable leaders to adapt their behaviours to specific follower needs, facilitated by ‘situational adaptability’ practice (05.SL.NL; 11.SL.US; 26.ML.UK; book, 2009, p.56). The reviews were also described as enabling leaders to evaluate employees’ competencies to ensure they can confidently share responsibility (12.ML.UK; 05.TL.NL). Significantly, they were positioned as facilitating values alignment, particularly, in assessing how employees live the company's values (01.SL.US; 05.SL.US; 04ML.BL).

These were also perceived by both groups to create opportunities for ‘*building positive relationships*’ and ‘*open dialogue*’ between leaders and employees, facilitating not only community-building, but collaboration, communication and learning processes (e.g., 09.CEO.US; 01.SL.US; 04.ML.BL). Leaders are perceived as using these reviews as a context to consistently model values, making them salient ‘for employees to follow’ (e.g., 17.EM.UK; 28.EM.UK), like: “*We are reminded of the values in our reviews... that makes a difference*” (14.EM.UK). The company supplements this with an annual ‘values assessment’ to determine ‘*incidence rate*’ of conduct which are ‘contrary to their values’, reviewed by the Ethics and Compliance Committee, to reinforce alignment (ESG 2020, p.29). These assessment approaches were presented as mechanisms for influencing both SL and CS individual behaviours, supporting their stated overarching value of ‘doing the right thing’ (ESG, 2022, p.8). They were perceived to develop in both leaders and followers, a ‘greater sense’ of self-awareness and awareness of others’ needs (07.EM.UK; 09.SL.US; ESG, 2020, p.20), essential to SL, CS and ST alike.

These accounts suggest potential alignment with ST’s principles of interconnectedness and SL’s responsiveness, however, the focus on consistency and compliance risks inadvertently signalling normative reinforcement rather than system-wide adaptability or learning. On an organisational level, the company outlines various methods for ‘expanding awareness’

beyond internal reviews, through stakeholder feedback and 'risk management' assessments (ESG, 2020, p.36; ESG, 2022, p.7). These are positioned as essential to help evaluate '*ongoing risks and conflicts*', and to identify 'ESG issues and impacts' of greatest concern (ESG 2022, p.7; 32.EM.LX); aligning with company value#4- *understanding their role and accountability for their impact on all stakeholders* (ESG, 2020, p.5). These suggest a recognition of the dynamic nature of sustainability challenges; however, it is still unclear how stakeholder feedback translates to structural adaptation.

Moreover, innovation team-led assessments are used to evaluate their '*current ESG practices*' against the '*leading best ESG practices*' to identify areas for improvement (ESG, 2020, p.12), informing actions to refine both future ESG strategy and reporting. The company is reportedly experimenting with innovative solutions, perceived to contribute to '*a sustainable world*' while strengthening their '*successful business model*', proud to pass onto future generations (ESG, 2022, p.2). These assessments were theoretically positioned as helping the company in 'testing and refining' their ESG systems, and to formulate a 'clear vision and strategy' for integrating a 'unified sustainability lens' into their culture, decisions and processes across regions (ESG, 2022, p.58).

The company describes these organisational assessments as an '*ongoing*' part of the "*evolution of the company*" (ESG, 2020, p.63). Through these monitoring practices, the company declared learning that sustainability drivers 'differ in different regions' (ESG, 2020, p.3). Yet the approaches appear more oriented toward standardisation of values and mindset, further indicating a rather normative rather than contextual-oriented adaptation. Moreover, their 2022 report still quotes those same findings from the last (2020) report, indicating no new 'ongoing' assessments were carried out in between to inform future actions.

Overall, the company theoretically position its assessments approaches as facilitating SL accounted behaviours, supporting processes in refining CS strategy, systems and reporting. They are described as enabling stakeholder inclusion and awareness of stakeholder needs and regional differences in sustainability drivers (ESG, 2022). Ongoing monitoring is presented as necessary for organisational-level adaptability for change, for maintaining individual-level awareness, and to adapt leadership behaviours and learning experiences. This consistency is seen as vital for aligning and maintaining an influence on individuals SL/CS values, behaviours and mindset (09.CEO.US; ESG, 2022), to drive necessary ESG changes in culture, systems, and behaviours (ESG, 2022). Nonetheless, systemic tensions remain.

The company's current monitoring framework, seem to be centred on performance reviews, values compliance assessments, and intermittent top-down ESG evaluations. Although, theoretically intended for a systemic approach, it tends to lean more toward standardisation and normative reinforcement rather than critical systemic insight, essential for complex sustainability leadership. Assessments appear more focused on confirming adherence and adaptability to predetermined values than on emergent patterns (e.g., dissent) that could drive deeper systemic change. While such mechanisms promote alignment, cohesion and incremental ESG refinement, it risks filtering out critical perspectives that might challenge existing frameworks, perspectives that ST recommends as essential sources of innovation and adaptation.

Moreover, the inconsistent implementation of assessments, such as the reuse of 2020 ESG findings in the 2022 report, suggests limited recurrence, with no clear evidence of updates in between. This indicates a gap between the organisation espoused behaviours of 'ongoing' assessment and its practical application, despite being recognised as essential to refine and evolve its ESG strategy. Significantly, it indicates that monitoring may be too infrequent to

capture the dynamic nature of complex systems in real-time, weakening SL's adaptive potential and ST's learning loops. Genuine systems change requires consistent and continuous monitoring, so not to undermine the organisation's capacity to remain 'aware' of the dynamic stakeholder priorities and regional variations in sustainability drivers, a complexity that the company itself acknowledges (ESG, 2022, p.58). Furthermore, while these monitoring approaches may help gain immediate awareness of stakeholder needs, there is little evidence that they develop understanding of complex system dynamics, feedback loops, or emergent patterns. A more consistent and inclusive approach could better support the organisation's contextual responsiveness. Such systems-informed approach would create clearer pathways from merely gathering and monitoring insights to structural experiments and evaluation based on findings and feedback loops.

In conclusion, while the company's monitoring processes theoretically connect SL behaviours with CS outcomes, they show limitations in fostering a truly systems thinking informed leadership. The current approach appears more inclined towards reinforcing predetermined frameworks rather than developing capacity for systems analysis and adaptation, required for a contextually-sensitive structural change. For monitoring to become a driver for systemic transformation, it would need to evolve from primarily an alignment or feedback mechanism to an evaluative, learning system that embraces complexity and contextual variation. Such a process would need decentralising data collection and interpretation, and engaging diverse stakeholder narratives to detect interdependencies and contextual tensions, not just to align or gather information to refine predefined strategies. It also needs to embrace divergent, critical insights as a source of innovation rather than as a threat to alignment, and then adapt strategies in real time. In doing so, it would transform reviews from quarterly check-ins into ongoing process for systemic evolution, needed to drive continuous adaptation to complex sustainability challenges.

Theoretically, such process is central to how ST might operationalise SL by enabling clear feedback loops, responsiveness to context, and root-cause analysis of tensions. It also reinforces the three prior systemic processes, *adaptive learning*, *integrative communication*, and *systemic innovative collaboration*, by enabling feedback-informed development, refining collaborative strategies, and enhancing educational and communication efforts. In that, it can function as both a reflective and proactive process- helping to monitor ongoing dynamics, evaluate the causal relations and leverage points, and readjust future actions accordingly. Such an inclusive monitoring and evaluation process would enable a deeper systemic and analytical thinking that can inform not only compliance but also continuous adaptation, learning, and innovation across diverse contexts.

Finally, having theoretically identified the four systemic processes, namely: Integrative Communication, Adaptive Learning, Systemic Innovative Collaboration, and Inclusive Monitoring and Evaluation, it is therefore, necessary to understand how these holistically contribute to the overall process of change at both individual and organisational levels, using CS as a context for complex challenges.

## **5.2. The Change process Pathway**

This section analyses the pathways through which company's SL foster a sustainable systemic change at both individual and organisational levels.

The company claims to be taking a 'transformational, systemic collaborative approach' to long-term change towards its ESG strategy (ESG, 2022, p.37). This was said to involve refining strategic initiatives in a way that 'holistically reflect' the top priorities of their ESG plans (p.9), with a key focus on integrating a unified 'sustainability lens' into processes and decisions, to embed new individual 'ways of thinking' that drive more 'sustainable solutions'

across organisational systems (p.1). This implies a dual-level change: fostering a new sustainability mindset at the individual level, which then becomes integrated into organisational systems and processes to drive sustainable change. To achieve their ESG objectives, the company emphasises creating individuals ‘capabilities’ through ‘leadership involvement’, education, aligning objectives and ensuring cohesive global actions (p.17), and ‘ongoing leadership communications’ (2020, p.38). It also set out to focus on pursuing identified opportunities for improvements in systems and processes, such as ‘manufacturing process’ changes which could help in reducing environmental impacts (p.17).

At the individual level, the company acknowledges difficulty of shifting *individual’s behaviour* and thus focuses on where they ‘*can influence a change*’ (ESG, 2020, p.37). The company has identified a need for ‘foundational groundwork’ to help teams understand sustainability concepts and their importance (ESG, 2022, p.58), citing a ‘learning mindset’ and the ‘will’ of their people to contribute to something bigger, as enablers for such influence (p.32). To effectively motivate employee engagement, they report learning that more education and training, cross-functional collaboration, ongoing discussions, and expanded ESG awareness are necessary to ‘drive the changes’ in internal processes, systems, and behaviours (ESG, 2022, p.47, p.58). This, in turn, is stated to have helped to formulate a ‘clear’ vision and strategy for ultimately integrating the ‘sustainability mindset’ into their ‘strategies and processes’ (ESG, 2022, p.57).

As previously noted in leader accounts, the “*buy-in of the senior leadership is very important*” (26.ML.UK) and ‘education and reality check’ need to include everyone, from “*the board and senior leadership down*” to effect change across departments- “*change the way every department works*” (11.SL.US). The company's perspective is that “mindset’ shapes behaviours and decisions (ESG, 2022, p.56), making the change at the individual level essential for embedding systemic change organisationally. Although at the same time, this is

constrained by previously noted internal cultural inertia, that risk undermining mindset shifts (26.ML.UK), such as a few senior leaders with long tenures holding onto traditional command leaderships and who “*do not like to get involved but just throw orders*” (Participant x1). Also, while declaring top-down and bottom-up systemic integration (Company Website 2024), participants’ accounts revealed that a number of board members do not see the importance of sustainability, and still holding on profit-centric approaches (11.SL.US) and entrenched power dynamics, promoting each other’s voices (Participant x2).

Such senior leadership resistance was mentioned requiring “*a bit of a mindset shift*” to overcome entrenched biases (26.ML.UK), and to “*continue to state reality and keep abreast of it*” (11.SL.US), or even a “*change management*” to achieve “*the mindset growth across the organisation*” (26.ML.UK; 05.SL.NL). The need for such mindset shift is further stressed by the company’s recognition that mindset shapes individual behaviours, which are ultimately reflected in the organisational decisions-making process and ‘global systems’ (ESG, 2022, p.56).

At organisational level, their FY20 assessment claimed to reveal a need for ‘a better system’ to achieve sustainability goals (ESG, 2022, p.49), and it has since declared taking a ‘holistic’ innovative approach to develop solutions that better ‘serve’ stakeholders’ needs (p.42). This is intended to drive an aligned and innovative change across their global systems, to achieve ‘win-win’ solutions that benefit people, planet and profit (ESG, 2020, p.48). These steps are considered essential for creating ‘transformational’, ‘systemic long-term change’ (ESG, 2022, p.37), reflecting their evolving understanding of ESG priority areas (ESG, 2022, p.3).

Subsequently, the company states that they have ‘*evolved*’ their ESG focus, given the ‘*very high*’ level of member interest and engagement in ESG efforts (ESG, 2020, p37).

Although, for effectiveness, the company stresses that changes at both individual and organisational levels must align, as ‘mindset/lens’ needs to be ‘adapted’ to suit the processes and ‘systems in each region’ (ESG, 2022, p.58). However, an employee account highlighted “*physical disconnection*” in office design between leaders and employees (17.EM.UK) that can impact authentic engagement (20.LL.UK). This not only contradicts company’s espoused values of inclusion and equity but also highlights a mismatch between individual relational behaviours and systemic design. As such, it demonstrates the importance of aligning individual behaviours and mindsets with organisational systems, as it can erode leader-follower relationship. This is implicitly suggested in the employee continuing statement that “*Not to say there is a disconnection, really. But I think relations with manager would be better maybe if we would feel the physical presence more, if we were located beside each-other*” (17.EM.UK). This also indicates that such a structural misalignment can undermine employee perceived authenticity in the leaders, which can undermine opportunities of where they “*can influence a change*” (ESG, 2020, p.37), especially, if SL leaders are not sensed as “*setting examples for others to follow*” (14.EM.UK); thus, impacting SL’s capacity to influence systemic transformation.

Furthermore, though the importance of regional adaptation is acknowledged, there is limited evidence that these adaptations are co-developed or contextually driven. While this suggests conceptual alignment with ST, it does not clearly translate into structural redesign or distributed agency. Strategic assessments continue to emphasise ‘optimising’ collaboration, systems and processes (ESG, 2022, p.9), which implies system refinement more than systemic change. The company’s own acknowledgement, 2 years later, that ‘diverse interpretations’ exist in the organisation globally around sustainability (p.58) further indicates the limits of standardised solutions, especially across global regions. These inconsistencies in sustainability mindset, interest and drivers was evident in different participants accounts

across regions ( 31.EM.NL; 41.EM.FR; 08.EM.UK), indicating no meaningful change over the past 3 years+ since they declared a unified SL/CS mindset and increased stakeholder communication commitment (ESG, 2020). These fragmentations raise questions about the consistency of SL implementation across regions and the depth of the ‘systemic’ approach to sustainability they claimed taking. Moreover, this ‘unified adaptation of mindset/systems’ commitment also conflicts with company’s alignment processes, recycled assessments (2022 report citing 2020 data) and segregated workspace designs, suggesting that its priority lies in normative standardisation, while deeper systemic issues remain insufficiently addressed, such as: structural power imbalances (*e.g., long-serving senior leaders with entrenched mini culture or top-down communication* (26.ML.UK)) or regional dynamics (*e.g., such as inconsistent cross-region communication and engagement, where some reported limited access to sustainability information* (19.EM.UK), *low involvement/interest in ESG efforts* (41.EM.FR), *and decisions made strictly between senior leadership and specific R&D members* (38.EM.UK; 20.LL.UK). These patterns point to a tendency to address surface-level symptoms (*like plastic reduction or collecting sporadic feedback*) rather than systemic root cause analysis (*like entrenched hierarchical cultures that could hinder decentralised decision-making and regional adaptability*). This oversight could limit the potential for genuine structural transformation, weakening the company aspiration to build a unified, sustainability mindset across all regions (ESG, 2022, p.58).

Overall, this analysis reveals a critical tension: company’s SL emphasis on leader-led cultural transformation may be undermined by SL inaptitude to reconfigure (individual/structural level) power dynamics, hindering that same transformation. While the strategic emphasis on leadership education, holistic innovation, and stakeholder communication aims to develop capability to act ‘systemically’ (p.17), much of it remains top-down, one-way and shaped by predetermined values and goals. Furthermore, the continuing reliance on optimising existing

processes over rethinking their foundations further exposes SL's limitations. While the organisation declared taking 'systemic, transformative', long-term approach to change, this aspiration is contradicted by an implementation pattern that emphasises 'alignment', 'refining the strategy', 'optimising collaboration, time, resources and capabilities', 'testing /optimising/ refining systems and processes' (ESG, 2022, pp.9-11, p.58), 'getting teams on board to achieve the predefined goals' (04.ML.BL) and 'to adapt to optimised systems' (01.SL.US), rather than on co-redesigning those systems.

Initiatives tend to focus on technical solutions like plastic reduction, siloed community initiatives and selective partnerships, reflecting a preference for low-risk incremental than transformative change. For instance, 'holistic innovation' (ESG 2020, p.48) addresses symptoms (e.g., packaging efficiency through Smart \*\*\* design) while ignoring systemic root causes, e.g., continued reliance on aluminium canisters, and single-use delivery systems that maintains the same linear resource-intensive system that conflicts with sustainable resource use (2022 Annual Report, p.4). This example reflects a pattern where innovation is framed in terms of functionality and brand performance, but not as a means for tackling deeper ecological and labour issues (p.3), limiting the company's systemic responsiveness to environmental and social challenges.

Additionally, company's 'geographic expansion', particularly in high-growth markets such as China, and India, is framed as one of the top 'Must-Win' Battles (ESG, 2022, p.3). However, it focuses largely on driving revenue and speed of penetration without reflecting on how context-sensitive models or stakeholder co-design might enable more sustainable, inclusive market integration (ESG, 2022, p.3). The systemic root implication appear to be again under-addressed, such as expanding a Western product model without sufficiently addressing the local sustainability drivers, infrastructure, or labour implications, particularly in markets where environmental protections may differ (p.4). For instance, there is no discussion of

regulatory diversity, long-term social impact/ ecological constraints in local systems, or of adaptation strategies to regional sustainability needs (not accounted for even in Scope 3 reporting), rather than just various alignment strategies. This suggests a one-way growth model, lacking co-creation and contextual sensitivity despite acknowledging differences in CS drivers, potentially impacting SL's commitment to stewardship and awareness.

Also, the strong alignment of employees around purpose (reportedly 93% according to the ESG report (2022, p.1) and leaders (e.g., 09.CEO.SL; 01.SL.US), while boasted as a sign of a unified, values-driven culture, this high level of cohesion may also be masking an imposed normative identity or emotional pressure that can discourage dissent and alternative thinking, especially in a culture described as a “tribe” (*as also pointed out by the overwhelming lack of critics in the majority of participants' accounts*). Even learning, while positive in fostering employee development, it is framed around an emphasis on ‘learning velocity’ (p. 2), rooted in performance and agility but lacks the integration of deeper systems literacy or the development of critical thinking for a system-wide transformation. Overlooking such systemic cause-relationships, risks reducing SL's processes to mere mechanisms of soft control rather than empowering systemic reflexivity, potentially limiting both innovation and adaptability.

These observations further indicate that though SL successfully fosters cohesion through values alignment and community-building, it lacks the systemic analytical tools to translate this into contextual/ structural change. To strengthen the ‘systemic transformative’ potential of SL, a deeper integration of ST in processes is much needed, to help it evolve into a leadership capable of navigating complexity, engaging divergent stakeholder perspectives, and embedding tailored long-term change across contexts.

### 5. 3. Executive Summary

Building upon previous accounts of SL behavioural themes, this analysis explored how these are enacted in practice, and whether the underlying mechanisms foster genuine systemic change or merely reinforces pre-existing normative frameworks, as flagged in various accounts.

The overall analysis highlights a persistent SL foundational theoretical gap: SL influences individual behaviours but fails to equip followers with systemic literacy- *the ability to navigate power/regional asymmetries*. While the company frequently frames its sustainability approach as ‘systemic’ using “holistic innovation” (ESG 2020, p.48), the measures often reflect incremental optimisation, rather than restructuring those systems through local inclusion, critical reflexivity, or structural/ power redistribution. For instance, it addresses manifested labour issues (e.g., offering wellbeing webinars and diversity training) while neglecting systemic root causes (e.g., entrenched cultural norms and hierarchical structures that limit inclusive decision-making and authentic engagement). To become realistically adaptive and sustainable, the company must shift focus from optimising within systems to re-designing them collaboratively with wider stakeholders.

Also, the ‘one tribe’ culture and ‘sustainability mindset’ are positioned as universal across all regions (e.g., 05.SL.NL; 11.SL.US), with no evidence of local cultural adaptation strategy (ESG, 2020/22). The DEI+B program is treated as an emergent property of behavioural interactions, which demonstrate an ST element, however it is undermined by global standardisation, disregarding local norms where needs and interpretation differ (e.g., gender equity in Middle East vs. in Western culture). Even emerging markets (growth priority #3) lack evidence of tailored strategies (ESG, 2020/22). This indicates that, while SL provides

ethical and relational foundation, it lacks the systemic depth needed for contextual adaptability, structural innovation, and deeper systems awareness.

Overall, the analysis suggests that organisational SL processes, while fostering alignment, cultural cohesion and sustainability engagement, are currently enacted through fragmented, values reinforcing, and standardised approaches, that may limit regional adaptability and deep system learning. As such, the company's aspiration for systemic long-term change, particularly in sustainability, requires a move towards more systems thinking-informed SL processes, operating as dynamic learning loops rather than static or isolated alignment tools.

The four theoretically elaborated processes outlined previously: Integrative Communication, Adaptive Learning, Systemic Innovative Collaboration, and Inclusive Monitoring and Evaluation, could contribute to the necessary ingredients for this shift. By contrast, to the traditional ones, these theoretically ST-evolved processes could foster genuine systemic change by embracing inclusive critical reflexivity, complexity and emergence, as an integrated framework:

Theoretically, Integrative Communication, facilitates alignment not by enforcing uniformity but by making space for divergence through multi-directional sense-making; Adaptive Learning enables continuous feedback loop that allows for contextual responsiveness and innovation; Systemic Innovative Collaboration moves beyond the traditional 'partnerships' based on compliance toward co-creation that bridges organisational silos and stakeholder boundaries; and Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation shifts from a mere tool of alignment and refinement into a reflective and proactive participatory process for structural feedback, real-time learning and ongoing systemic adaptation. As such, these interdependent processes reinforce one another, and together lay the foundation for a systemic servant leadership (SSL)

framework, with the potential to enable SL to move beyond relational and service motivation toward a deeper systemic impact.

However, the potential of this integrated framework lies in its ability to address four critical and persistent tensions that emerged throughout the analysis: normative control, power imbalance, complexity navigation, and scalability tensions. Each of the processes theoretically contributes toward partially addressing these challenges, by replacing top-down value enforcement with inclusive dialogue and feedback (addressing normative control); by redistributing influence and enhancing innovative collaboration (addressing power imbalance); by building capacity for learning and adaptation (addressing complexity); and together by co-creating and structurally embedding leadership values across functions and regions through continuous root cause analysis and stakeholder-centric feedback loop evaluation (addressing scalability).

Yet, enabling these shifts is contingent on more than process systemic redesign, given the need for an adapted mindset/ system approach. Since mindset shapes practices and processes ultimately becoming embedded in global systems across regions (ESG, 2022), it, therefore, requires parallel and mutually reinforcing transformation paths, at both individual and organisational levels. Without these dual shifts, even well-conceived processes risk becoming performative or superficial without internal capacities to activate them.

SL with its emphasis on serving others and fostering growth, holds significant potential to facilitate this dual-levels transformation. However, to realise its potential for systemic transformation, it needs to evolve into a systems-informed leadership, one that treats processes as an integrated pathway to change, rather than isolated practices; holistically linking mindset, behaviour, systems, and strategy. This is essential not only to develop structural adaptiveness at the organisational level but also to foster individual systems

awareness and decentralised decision-making across global contexts. This dual-level shift would enable a more systemic SL role, to serve not just as a means of maintaining alignment but as a driver for genuine co-created systemic transformation.

## **Chapter 6- The integrated research**

### **6. Introduction**

This chapter integrates all the elements and perspectives of the research that led to answering the central research question. This set-out to explore how can an international organisation systemically implement servant-leadership in the long-term, with corporate sustainability as an important contextual outcome. To address this enquiry, the study adopted a multi-level qualitative approach, drawing on rich data from an international organisation that has embedded SL into its leadership culture over the past 25 years. By combining leader and follower perspectives, the research contributes a nuanced understanding of both SL's limitations and its evolutionary potential, culminating in the development of a new framework: Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL).

While previous research suggested various positive outcomes of SL (see Eva et al., 2019 review), mostly in stable conditions though (e.g., Liden et al., 2014; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Graham, 1999), its actual application in large-scale, complex, organisations remained largely underexplored (Eva et al., 2021; Peterson et al, 2012). In particular, the mechanisms through which SL behaviours influence systemic organisational outcomes, such as sustainability, have been conceptually and empirically scarce (Bragger et al., 2021; Kantabutra, 2020; Rodriguez and Franco, 2019; Sun, 2013). In the process of addressing these gaps, this study also

explored scholars' proposals relating to the potential variance in leaders SL behaviour amongst teams (Liden et al., 2008) and SL's strong focus on organisational CS (Ling et al., 2017; Dierendonck, 2011).

This chapter synthesises the primary insights of this research, responding to some of the SL critics in the literature, and discussing the tensions that may constrain SL's systemic organisation-wide implementation. In doing so, it demonstrates how empirical insights justify the theoretical dual-level evolution of servant-leadership into a more adaptive, systemic framework capable of driving systemic transformation at scale; while highlighting the contingencies that need to be met to enable this Systemic Servant Leadership, and the barriers that can arise if these conditions are not met, leading to the persist tensions. The chapter then concludes by presenting the final SSL framework and its ingredients drawn from the empirical findings in real-business settings, illustrating its potential for navigating complexity within the highly challenging context of corporate sustainability.

## **6.1. Key Insights from The Case Study**

In practice, leaders engaged in SL by prioritising others' needs, promoting their well-being, and development, which was universally perceived as their primary role as coaches by all participants: "that's really the concept of servant leadership, being a servant to success of your team or your people" (26.ML.UK). Leaders focused on followers' growth by granting autonomy, allowing space for learning and mistakes, including them in decisions, and letting them direct their own growth path, all while providing support and clarifying reasons, expectations, and goals. This approach is said to create self-managed, competent, and accountable followers by "cultivating among them a sense of ownership for what they're doing and a sense of empowerment to make things happen" (01.SL.US), thereby achieving individual, team, organisational, and CS goals (04.ML.BL). Employees perceived this as

creating a safe learning environment (e.g., 21.EM.NL; 27.EM.LX; 28.EM.UK), where they felt supported to pursue both personal development and company goals, including sustainability (19.EM.IR; 12.EM.UK; 41.EM.FR).

Furthermore, the company's leaders demonstrate commitment to followers and organisational goals by "partnering" for success (09.CEO.US), delegating responsibilities to enhance followers' growth (01.SL.US), while providing guidance and support. Accounts from both leader and follower groups indicated that the company's leadership operates from a position of equality, sharing responsibility and decisions with those who demonstrate alignment with SL values and possess the necessary competencies (04.ML.BL; 05.SL.NL; 20.LL.UK; 15.EM.UK; 27.EM.LX; 32.EM.LX). Greenleaf (2002) advocated the principle of "Primus inter pares- First among equals" (p.74) in leadership, which appears to be promoted within the company, by being "there upfront and sharing power" (20.LL.UK). In this vein, findings showed that employees' and external stakeholders' views were included in the ESG strategy, albeit sporadically (ESG, 2022, p.36). Employees corroborated having their opinions heard and being empowered with time-offs and resources to engage in community initiatives, reporting that such activities not only enhanced internal community cohesion but also helped to build stronger connections with external community (e.g., 14.EM.UK; 19.EM.IR; 17.EM.UK; 32.EM.LX).

In doing so, as expressed by both groups, leaders sought to expand awareness of key stakeholders' needs within the three ESG areas, and of their own impacts and roles within. They acknowledge that the company and themselves are part of a larger system: "it is all Servant leadership...it's a very much a holistic viewpoint, a wholeness, not just we need to perform, but we need to look after the people, not just the employees, but their community, the customers, the stakeholders, everyone" (12.ML.UK). Understanding and adhering to these holistic values was also said to enhance long-term awareness of stakeholders' needs and

situation, as well as leaders and followers' accountability and impact (ESG, 2020, p.5). In so, enabling leaders to use adaptive behaviours to better 'serve' them (ESG, 2020). This links to another key aspect of this investigation involved exploring the proposition by Liden et al. (2008), that leaders engage in varied SL behaviours within their teams, extending the inquiry into understanding the reasons influencing such variance.

The findings, particularly from the 'Situational Adaptability' theme, lent strong support to this proposition. Servant leaders were indeed found to adapt their behaviours to match specific individuals' needs, competencies, and situations. This adaptive behaviours were said to enable leaders to inspire each follower in different ways using individualised learning and support to match their needs and competencies. It was driven by the understanding that "serving others means you have to adjust your own behaviour to advance others' ability to succeed and to grow in their life and their career" (11.SL.US). This, in turn, was perceived to translate into "organisational success" (11.SL.US; 05.SL.NL; 26; ML.UK; 20.LL.UK) and to contribute to followers' well-being, inspiring them in turn to "contribute to something bigger than themselves" (09.CEO.US; 01.SL.US).

Conclusively, these accounts of behaviours, were clustered around six themes, collectively reflecting the relational, developmental, and ethical foundations of SL, while also revealing how they enact in practice within an international organisation setting: Aligning Values provided the ethical foundation. Support and Coaching built capability and psychological safety. Partnering Leadership empowered and engaged followers (to some extent). Situational Adaptability ensured situational relevance and flexibility. Building Community created the relational interconnections. Expanding Awareness, informed and refined the application of all the others.

Conversely, while the accounts indicated that SL in the company was often practiced with sincerity and consistency, it largely operated within normative boundaries shaped by organisational expectations, hierarchical power structures, and global alignment pressures. These tensions, many of which reflect longstanding limitations of SL, indicate that the mere emergence of the SL themes at the individual level, while crucial, is not sufficient for their structured and long-term embedding within international organisations as scale.

### **6.1.1. Theoretical Limitations of SL and The Need for Operational Framework**

SL is increasingly criticised for being conceptually ambiguous, structurally underdeveloped and ill-suited to high-speed, performance-driven environments (Eva et al., 2019; Liu, 2017; Andersen, 2009). Others claimed that SL is too soft (Song, 2018) or that it compromises organisational profitability by prioritising followers' needs and those outside the business (Sun, 2013; Andersen, 2009). Empirically, many leaders of the exemplary servant-led company X countered these views in their accounts, stating, "a lot of people call servant-leadership soft skills. These are hard skills, hard things to do because the old leadership style was command and control, but you can't make anybody do anything and sustain it" (09.CEO.US). Another leader reinforced this, asserting, "in terms of servant-leadership being weak, it's more of a strength. And I think what's very clever in Greenleaf's definition is that we're serving people's needs. And needs not wants", elaborating that the servant leader has to work on a balance between performance and people (12.MM.UK). These accounts highlight the paradoxical nature of servant-leadership, of balancing care with high expectations, and humility with awareness (05.SL.NL). Far from being soft SL as practised in this case company was experienced as both demanding and empowering but also rewarding. One leader stated, "there are some people who think that servant leadership could be hard to

model, but in the end, it has more rewards. I've had the loyalty of the people, they're committed. There's something that they're gaining, and the organisation grows that way as they grow” (18.ML.UK). Greenleaf (2002) believed that when leaders work to accomplish followers’ growth in a servant fashion, “others would respond with allegiance” (p.24) towards their team members and others. Therefore, by prioritising employees’ needs and supporting their growth, the servant-leader gains their competencies, loyalty, and engagement to collectively achieve organisational goals. This was reflected in many employee and leader views, e.g., “in turn I am very dedicated to my work” (12.EM.UK).

In regard to the gender expectation gap, which was claimed to reinforcing existing gender stereotypes and creating additional barriers for women in leadership positions (Tilghman-Havens, 2018; Koenig et al., 2011). Data have shown a company with proportionate male/female leaders at different managerial levels, sharing the same expectations, privileges and promotional opportunities: “we've got very strong leadership within company X, male and female leaders, um, which is a really nice environment. Cause generally in a lot of companies I've worked for, it's very male orientated, but actually the workforce within the company is very much balanced” (14.EM.UK); “ I'm on the gender equity group, and my manager is also on that group actually, and it's nice because although he's there as a man. Mostly just women and he’s leading by example” (02.EM.US). These accounts, amongst many others, as well as the fragmented participants sampling, counterevidence these feminist critics, at least within the exemplary servant-led organisation under study.

Findings also indicated a holistic-oriented approach, reflected in their values ranking, which were said to “all have to work together to achieve the success of the whole organisation” (05.SL.NL; and 01.SL.US; 09.CEO.US; 11.SL.US; 26.ML.UK; 33.ML.LX). This highlights that the company’s leaders are aware of the importance of economic value for the future of the organisation and its stakeholders (value#6), and that it is not compromised by their

people-first approach but rather enhanced by it, but prioritising doing so ethically: “if we do everything right, the first five values, automatically we will succeed” (09.CEO.US). These empirical findings corroborate the proponent literature arguing that SL maximises followers’ potential, which directly translates to organisational potential and overall performance (Hoch et al., 2018). As one leader summarised, “the success of the organisation is equal to the will and engagement of the people” (33.ML.LX).

Yet, despite these strengths, traditional SL models often fall short in their capacity to withstand complex business situations, and to drive scalable, context-responsive change (Eva et al., 2019; Van Diendonck et al., 2014; Sun, 2013). Scholars such as Liden et al. (2014) warn that such vague conceptualisation and operationalisation of SL can lead to superficial application. Moreover, its idealistic framing and lack of clear frameworks for implementation has led to perceptions of it being impractical for large-scale, competitive environments (e.g., Eva et al., 2019; Gandolfi and Stone, 2018; Anderson and Sun, 2017; Peterson et al, 2012). Large organisations, particularly in manufacturing or global operations (the case of the exemplary Company X) face significant difficulty translating SL’s values into practices without clearer structural frameworks (Sun, et al, 2024; Rodríguez-Carvajal et al, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Especially so, given that international organisations with expanded global units may struggle with SL’s demands for deep relationship building and individualised attention (Zhang et al., 2021; Hu and Liden, 2011), limiting its acceptance as comprehensive leadership model. Research highlight that SL’s potential in crisis context depends on its capacity to adapt, learn, and proactively influence collective change (Newman et al., 2022; Song, 2018; Panaccio et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2012). However, such practices need more than emotional and relational foundations, but the right tools to help navigate complexity (Holling 2020; Gibsson 2020).

In the case study, these issues were also suggested. SL was well embedded in the organisation's culture, with wide recognition of values such as service, emotional support, wellbeing and ethical accountability. However, the inherent limitations of traditional SL also emerged from the data, particularly in addressing normative pressures, power dynamics, adapting to regional variation, and responding to the complexities, highlighting the vulnerability of current processes and structure in Company X SL's implementation approaches across regions. These empirical observations flagged the need for a more systemically structured SL approach to better address the emergent tensions and barriers to SL sustained, scalable application, leading to the theoretical elaboration of the four systemic processes that could provide the necessary infrastructure for such systemic servant leadership implementation (presented in Chapter 5). These processes- Integrative Communication, Adaptive Learning, Systemic Innovative Collaboration and Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation- act as interconnected mechanisms that can translate individual servant behaviours into scalable, adaptive practices. Each process contributes to addressing a known limitation of traditional SL: 'Integrative Communication' shifts communication from top-down value dissemination to multi-directional narrative integration; 'Adaptive Learning' reframed training practices as continuous, context-sensitive adaptation rather than fixed competency development; 'Systemic Innovative Collaboration' moves traditional collaboration beyond interpersonal teamwork to co-creation across systems; and 'Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation' transforms evaluation into a dynamic, participatory tool for structural feedback rather than a compliance mechanism. Together, these processes form a self-reinforcing infrastructure, driving systemic impact, illuminating a significant path into how SL can evolve into a more context-sensitive, systems-informed, adaptive leadership framework. This theoretical elaboration reflects the growing reconsideration of SL's potential in addressing today's business issues (e.g., Eva, et al., 2019, Waldman, 2014, Kalshoven et al.,

2011; Graham, 1999); calling for a new frameworks that integrate SL's ethical core with mechanisms adapted to new complex challenges (e.g., Urrila and Eva, 2024; Wong et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Carvajal et al, 2022; Ayoub et al., 2015; Ferdig, 2007). This gap highlights the need for SL development at both individual level (mindset and behaviours) and organisational level (processes), to maintain a humanistic approach while dealing with complexities.

### **6.1.2. Structural and Analytical vulnerabilities and The Need for a Balanced Dual- Level Evolution**

The empirical findings not only reflected the relational and values-driven qualities of traditional SL but have also revealed its operational limits in addressing complexity, regional variation, and power imbalances, posing significant implementation challenges at scale.

While these qualities facilitate community cohesion, they rely heavily on normative conformity, refinements of systems and strategies, and standardised mechanisms that risk overlooking contextual nuances and entrenched power structures (see Chapters 4/5). These observations align with scholars' arguments that the focus of SL scholarship has remained mostly behavioural, overlooking the processes and organisational structures that are necessary to embed servant leadership across diverse teams, regions, and stakeholder groups (e.g., Meuser and Smallfield, 2023; Eva et al., 2019; Van Dierendonck and Patterson, 2015; Liden et al., 2008).

Moreover, servant-like behaviours, such as coaching, support, listening, or empowering others, were prominent in participants' narratives but were often overshadowed by alignment pressure, inconsistent education and communication, rigid review practices, and limited responsiveness to regional complexity. For example, dissent was framed as "misalignment" with values, causing many to leave the company, presumably because they could not align

with organisational culture and mentality (26.ML.UK). Education is anchored on SL principles and situational adaptability, but lacks a focus on contextual or systemic awareness, limiting its ability to equip individuals with the necessary analytical tools viewed necessary to respond to diverse regional challenges or evolving sustainability demands (e.g., Nunheset al., 2020; Mugadza and Marcus., 2019; Holling, 2001). A clear example supporting this is the company's acknowledgment that despite strong alignment with servant-leadership and values training, many employees still interpret sustainability narrowly, primarily as environmental impact, rather than as a systemic concept encompassing social and economic dimensions (36.EM.NL). In addition to the fragmented mindset, sustainability actions often addressed visible symptoms (e.g. packaging innovation) without systemic interrogation of root causes (e.g. single-use delivery). Such insights reveal how the current leadership approach leans towards standardisation and reinforcing values alignment without evidence of cultivating deeper structural support, much needed for lasting, scalable, and context-sensitive impact.

Taking these structural vulnerability into account, the study sought to explore SL through an ST lens, structuring it accordingly into systemic processes rather than just individual attributes. Systems thinking is viewed in the literature as a necessary tool to break this cycle (Meadow, 2008), yet participants narratives indicated a superficial implementation of ST at both individual and organisational levels (see Chapters 4/5). Empirical data shows that SL holistic view, while a strength, maintains its focus on individual relations (values alignments/ individual development/ followers/ community cohesion) and often lacks the analytical depth needed to manage broader complexities. The potential value of this systemic approach becomes even more evident when viewed through the lens of sustainability. CS, by nature, demands interdependent thinking, long-term planning, and responsiveness to evolving stakeholder needs, while maintaining strong ethical focus, which often cannot be addressed

by normative alignment or fixed set of values alone. This balance represents perhaps the most critical challenge for SL implementation, requiring a more structured framework capable of ethically navigating complex environments.

In response, from a theoretical lens, this research reconfigured current SL processes into mechanisms that are more structurally aligned with system-wide ethical and interconnected, contextual realities, highlighting the systemic benefit of evolving each traditional process into interdependent systems-aware process to facilitate SL's long-term implementation.

Theoretically, together, these can contribute towards mitigating the challenges of normative control, uneven regional adaptation, and static evaluation of impact by embracing regional diversity and adaptability into the organisational culture, generating real-time feedback loops, root cause analysis and double-learning loops that could promote ongoing refinement and evolution.

However, while these four systemic processes are designed to embed SL practices into a self-reinforcing infrastructure, alone, they cannot ensure ethical depth, relational authenticity, or individualised responsiveness. Tuan and Shaw (2016) argue that the potential conflict between traditional business and ethics is often related to managerial short-sightedness, and ST exposes those tensions and provides individuals with a holistic view to solve them more ethically. Khalil (1993) concurs that ethics is complex and so it takes cognitive power from the decision-maker, through systems reasoning, to come up with a new ethical decision. ST provides a broader understanding of the complex interconnection among systems, *'yet it cannot morally judge the systems change'* (Bansal and Song, 2017, p.128). This highlights the important role of individuals' mindset and morality to ethically guide the organisation through systems thinking processes. As Meadows (2008) explains that leveraging feedback loops within systems can create trust and engagement, only when systemic decisions are grounded in moral accountability. The systemic processes alone cannot inherently offer

guidance in contexts such as of ethical dilemmas or stakeholder specific needs (Kumar and Singh, 2023). Hence, where individual mindset becomes important, as when faced with different system changes, individuals' values influence decisions towards the morally acceptable system (Bansal and Song, 2017).

The company itself recognises that 'mindset forms the lens through which' they [leaders and followers] act and make decisions, 'ultimately becoming embedded in their systems and processes' (ESG, 2022, p.56). This challenge was reflected in this leader's observation: "there needs to be a bit of a mindset shift... if you want that mindset growth across the organisation" (26.ML.UK). Such findings echo calls in the literature for developing 'double-loop learning, (Argyris and Schön 1978), where individuals question underlying assumptions, not merely adjust behaviours. Without this level of individual mindset shift, the potential of systemic processes to enact meaningful change is significantly constrained. This is evidenced in the organisation's emphasis on reviews, cross-regional meetings, and stakeholder dialogue, stating the importance of 'ongoing discussions', that are meant to support engagement and transparency (ESG, 2022, p.38). Yet participants experiences revealed that these processes were, inconsistent, still quoting data from over two years ago (ESG, 2022, p.57), raising questions about the real-time responsiveness of these mechanisms.

These examples highlight that processes, even well-intended, can become stagnant, ritualised, or used to reinforce existing normative mindsets and power structures, if not supported by an adapted individual 'being' (Bragger et al., 2021) or systemic way of thinking. In other words, processes can function as either enablers or constraints, depending on whether the behaviours they operationalise have also evolved to embrace systems thinking as well. Empirically, the company also stresses that changes at both individual and organisational levels must align, as mindset needs to be adapted to "suit the processes and systems in each region" (ESG, 2022, p.58). However, this commitment to regional adaptation of mindset/systems conflicts with

company's alignment processes across regions, recycled assessments, segregated workspace designs (17.EM.UK), and plans for refining processes and strategies and getting employees adapting (01.SL.US), suggesting that company's priority lies in standardisation, while deeper systemic issues remain insufficiently addressed. Such issues include structural power imbalances (e.g., long-serving senior leaders with entrenched mini culture or top-down communication (26.ML.UK)); regional dynamics (e.g., such as inconsistent cross-region communication and engagement across regions, where some employees report limited access to sustainability learning (19.EM.UK), inconsistent interest/understanding in ESG efforts (40.EM.FR; 36.EM.NL); and exclusion from decisions- closed up, between senior leadership then transmitted top-down, or selective, with specific designated members- e.g., R&D (38.EM.UK; 20.LL.UK).

For instance, an employee highlighted "physical disconnection" between leaders and employees (17.EM.UK), which not only contradicts company's espoused values of inclusion and equity but also highlights the impact of mismatch between individual relational behaviours and systemic design on leader-follower perceived relationship: "relations with manager would be better maybe if we would feel the physical presence more" (17.EM.UK). It also indicates that such mindset/ systems misalignment can undermine employee perceived authenticity in the SL leader, if not sensed as "setting examples" (14.EM.UK). In turn, this can undermine opportunities where leaders 'can influence a change' (ESG, 2020, p.37) and thus, also limiting SL's capacity to influence a systemic transformation.

Even when new systems are put in place, the tensions in changing deeply embedded norms and ways of thinking, especially at senior levels, were found as crucial drivers for "a bit of a mindset shift" (26.ML.UK). This is critical as senior leadership is positioned by the company as the main drivers of change and CS, by setting and directing the strategies (ESG, 2022). Particularly, leaders are responsible for embedding and reviewing SL values across the

organisation, and so their mindset development is important as they can in turn influence their followers' behaviours (19.EM.IR; 14.EM.UK). This becomes more evident from the work of Liden et al (2014), on how leaders create a servant culture within their team, and in Urrila and Eva (2024) findings corroborating that there are trickle-down effects to SL development to followers and processes.

From an empirical lens, the exemplary case study company also highlighted the influence of leaders on followers' SL/ CS behaviours and mindset, through modelling, mentoring and setting the example. However, these were found to often being enacted within a standardisation-oriented approach, with "getting employees to adapt" (01.SL.US) to predefined leader-centric systems, rather than co-designing them. Although the company acknowledged the importance of growth and mindset development in influencing behaviour and decisions, it aimed at a unified approach, despite recognising the difference in CS and change drivers across regions. Even when employees mentioned the CEO listening session, it was only done once and was largely about getting stakeholders insights on 'what concerns them the most', without clear evidence of how their feedback informed decisions or systems design (ESG, 2020/22).

These accounts indicate that a systemic change without matching shifts in individual engagement may perpetuate existing fragmentation, normative control or power imbalances, rather than fostering a genuine SL implementation. This is because, while the four processes evolved at the organisational level, to embed ST deeper into SL systems, their effectiveness ultimately depends on an equally 'adapted' (ESG, 2020. p.10, p.58) evolution at the individual level, particularly, in leaders' and employees' mindset and behaviours. This view also aligns with a stream of SL scholarship highlighting that change starts from within (e.g., Urrila and Eva, 2023; Bragger et al., 2021; Liden et al., 2014; Keith, 2008), supporting the argument that a stronger focus on the individual leaders' development is needed to

complement the budding work on skills-based leadership development (Meuser and Smallfield, 2023).

Without a balanced systems-informed development at individual level, members risk stagnating in fragmented understanding rather than evolving towards the systemic clarity and adaptability that complex sustainability challenges demand; as indicated by this senior leader: “Like many of them [employees] still think that for the plant-based formula we’re good, and it is not the case” (11.SL.US). The four systemic processes, thus, provide the enabling mechanisms, but it is the active individual internalisation and enactment of systems awareness, co-created values and sharing authority that reinforces their effectiveness.

Without internalising ST principles (e.g., an understanding of interdependence, feedback loops, and contextual variation) along with the moral values, the organisation-wide processes risk becoming performative rather than ethically transformative mechanisms.

Empirically, this view is supported by evidence of disconnection between espoused values and regional practice, particularly where stakeholder voice is filtered through alignment mechanisms such as the Code of Conduct (ESG, 2022) or where collaboration is framed more as coordination than co-creation (05.SL.NL). For SL to evolve into a systemically embedded, leadership paradigm, both, its themes and traditional processes must co-evolve, not in isolation but as a dual-level transformation. One that develops distributed influence and systems awareness at the individual level while reconfiguring systems and processes to support adaptability, inclusion and context-sensitivity across the organisation. This view draws on contingency theory, which holds that leadership effectiveness depends on the alignment between leadership style and contextual factors (Woodward, 1958; Fiedler, 1964; Donaldson, 2001). Empirical findings suggest that, in increasingly complex, volatile, and interdependent environment, a static, universal model of SL is mostly insufficient. Traditional SL themes, while ethically robust, often lack the flexibility and analytical rigour required to

respond to shifting stakeholder demands, regional variation, and unprecedented events, much needed in such complex global context like CS.

This dual-level mindset/ system transformative approach ensures that SL is not limited to internalised values but is situated within an adaptive system that strengthen its contextual reach and impact. This proposed dual evolution aims at directly addressing gaps identified in the literature related to the need for a holistic, practice-oriented approach to develop servant-leadership (e.g., Meuser and Smallfield, 2023; Bragger et al., 2021). Especially so, since “understanding practices that can enhance this development is sorely lacking” (Urrila and Eva, 2024, p14). This research contributes to this understanding, showing not just what SL looks like in practice but how and why it could evolve, at both individual and organisational levels, to remain relevant in today’s global complex contexts. This means that, the processes (the how) should be enabled by behaviours; and behaviours (the why) should become systemically informed, capable of ethically responding to complex challenges across systems. In so doing, it theoretically highlights how systems thinking can strengthen not only the processes, but the individual behaviours (themes) as well, holistically developing SL into a Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL): a framework with the potential of addressing some of the key limitations of SL’s sustainable implementation and scalability.

## **6.2. Organisational Tensions and The Evolution towards SSL**

This study provided empirical and theoretical evidence supporting the dual SL transformation, i.e. to further enhance the accounted (themes) SL behaviours’ capacity to be better adapted to the systemically evolved processes that were elaborated in Chapter 5. The company’s SL mechanisms’ overreliance on normative cohesion, leader-centred influence, and standardisation can significantly constrain its potential to navigate the systemic, interconnected global challenges. This resulted in the theoretical elaboration of the 4 systemic

processes, reflecting the systemic lens adopted while examining the interplay between the six SL themes revealed across participants accounts. Each of the Aligning Values, Support and Coaching, Partnering Leadership, Situational Adaptability, Building Community, and Expanding Awareness themes, represent a key component of how SL is enacted in practice according to participants. However, when critically examined, they revealed underlying tensions that may limit the transformative potential of SL, particularly in relation to organisational scalability, normative pressures, power distribution, and contextual responsiveness.

In addressing these persistent tensions, this research theoretically posits that only through a dual parallel transformation at both, organisational level (processes and systems) and individual level (mindset and behaviour), can SL evolve into a paradigm capable of navigating complexity and of broader systemic impacts. This means that, unless the processes are activated by ethically grounded, systems-aware mindset and behaviour, they can become technical, performative or control-oriented (Meadows, 2008). On the same time, unless SL behavioural themes equally embrace systemic thinking, the processes risk remaining contextually shallow, normatively narrow, or structurally inconsistent (Senge, 1990). While the original themes formed a self-sustaining ethical and relational foundation, particularly in stable conditions, their effectiveness and sustainability in complex environments can be amplified by embracing a systems thinking perspective, in so adapting mindset to processes. ST enables both individuals and the organisation to map interdependencies, anticipate ripple effects, and co-create solutions with external actors, thus helps extend SL's relational trust and impact beyond organisation boundaries.

Subsequently, enabled by the evolved processes, each of the SL themes identified in chapter 4, needed to equally theoretically evolve into a more robust Systemic SL 'dimension' to

address the limitations in their analytical and transformative depth. To elaborate this evolution, the discussion proceeds to unpack four key tensions that surfaced through the research, each shows the limitations of SL in practice and how the evolved SSL dimension and corresponding systemic process(es) theoretically respond to them:

### **6.2.1. Normative Control Tension: *From Alignment to Co-Creation***

The company focused on ensuring that members embodied the company's core values reflecting the importance of moral and cultural alignment between leaders and followers. This served as the foundational normative compass, creating shared ethical foundation across global operations and long-term engagement with the company's purpose. However, the analysis revealed tension between individual agency and predefined values alignment, that may limit the transformative potential of SL at scale. While fostering cohesion and shared purpose is crucial, scholars such as Kunda (1992); Fleming (2009) and Alvesson (2011), amongst others, warn that a rigid values-driven approach can inadvertently lead to a form of 'normative control'. This relates to practices aimed at creating high commitment cultures, through shared values, beliefs and norms (Kunda, 1992), that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), so that employees form an emotional identification with the company (Fleming, 2009). The aim here is that workers gain a sense of shared meaning and belonging by internalising the values and vision of the organisation, much like a 'clan' (Ouchi, 1979), since committed workers are perceived as more motivated and agreeable to the emotional labour challenges (Frenkel et al., 1999).

Findings indicated that values alignment in the case company tend to function as ideological enforcement tools, where leaders are expected to model the values (setting the example),

consistently reinforcing them through structured performance reviews (14.EM.UK; 05.SL.US; 09.CEO.US) and formalised ‘incidence rate assessments’ (ESG, 2020, p.29). This approach can be viewed through a critical lens as a structured reinforcement of corporate ideals aimed at shaping identity (‘tribe’), belonging and expectations in organisational-specific ways. The consistent framing of a "we collective" (01.SL.US), with descriptions of a “tribe” as “self-sustaining,” ‘values-aligned individuals’, and ‘with a sense of belonging’, across global regions (ESG 2020–2022, p.11), exemplify to some extent a normative framework that may promote cohesion but risks reinforcing cultural conformity guided by the subtle demand to belong and to embody the tribe’s identity (Ouchi, 1979), or homogeneity (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), privileging alignment over diversity of thought and standardisation over complexity (another critical tension).

While employees recognise leaders’ positive influence, it is often overshadowed by hierarchical and normative pressures: “employees have to demonstrate how they lived the values in the last three months” (09.CEO.US), potentially creating pressure on them to conform outwardly, coupled with having the values engraved on the walls to serve as a daily reminder (20.LL.UK). Employees’ frequent reference to ‘set of values’, ‘tribe members’, and to ‘doing the right thing’ amongst many other specific terms, indicates employee acceptance of these core principles, and a strong group identity with the organisational culture. However, it is ensured through strict processes to recruit ‘similar’ ‘like-minded people’ (01.SL.US) and SL trainings, suggesting that belonging is contingent on aligning with predefined shared corporate values, which inherently contradict the notion of ‘diversity’ the company aspires for, and potentially limiting dissent and alternative perspectives to emerge. Mandatory training framed around values and strategic alignment, seems empowering, but may also point to normative pressures that can limit individual agency, and SL transformative potential

given that its best test being: “do those served become, freer, more autonomous...?”

(Greenleaf, 1977, p.27).

Moreover, employees accounts largely suggest that values are modelled and reinforced emotionally, reflected through statement like: “appealing” (14.EM.UK), “makes me want to be a better member” (12.EM.UK), “we value doing the right thing” (15.EM.UK), “like to make things better than today” (35.EM.UK), “I try to leave a lasting impact” (16.EM.NL). This practice may discourage questioning, turning values into emotional norms rather than enabling a co-constructed meanings, as Boje (2014) argues, “a dominant narrative, can silence the living stories”(p.3). Employees’ accounts unanimously shared the exact same language as the organisation and leaders, with an overwhelming lack of critics.

Such alignment framework can blur the line between values-driven leadership and compliance as monitoring metrics, transcending moral agency in favour of expected conduct and belonging. The emphasis on employees to take full responsibility for their personal growth (ESG, 2022), while operating within a structured framework of values-based compliance assessment suggests a contradiction between promoting predefined competency and values metrics, and autonomy and self-driven development. This may create the potential for performative alignment, where employees engage with development initiatives primarily to meet organisational expectations rather than for intrinsic growth (Kunda, 1992). These pressures risk undermining genuine experimentation and risk-taking, if employees feel the need to continuously self-monitor to fit within the predefined corporate framing of goals as moral imperatives (e.g., 17.EM.UK; 20.LL.UK).

Employees are expected to take an accountability pledge before they are entrusted with greater responsibilities (ESG, 2022, p.21), making autonomy contingent to adherence to corporate values and strategic principles: “I proved myself, and then I was allowed to take

more initiative” (19.EM.IR). This highlights a form of conditional empowerment approach, where autonomy is not a given, but a reward for compliance, and for cultural fit: “We can always try to teach them to do the job, it's more important to have aligned values” (05.SL.NL). This, further frame alignment as a prerequisite to career development and collaboration, whereas its overemphasis suggest implicit exclusion criteria: those who differ in thinking or background may be subtly filtered out (causing some to leave even).

The company's emphasis on aligning team members is intended to support collective outcomes, but the structure often limits the space for bottom-up critical input. This can potentially discourage different or dissenting views for fear not to fit in, to make other members uncomfortable (12.EM.UK), or to avoid political blame, judgements, exclusion from decision and job insecurity (20.LL.UK; Participant X1/X 2). This is reinforced by leaders describing this internalisation as “employees bought in to that [culture]” (05.SL.NL), rather than a critically and mutually discussed process. Externally, the selective approach to external partnerships based on value alignment suggests a normative extension beyond the organisation, potentially limiting divergent perspectives that could drive innovation and adaptation. These arguments support other scholars’ view like Fleming and Sturdy (2011), that rigid adherence to pre-defined norms can alienate those with alternative perspectives, leading to superficial compliance rather than deep commitment. According to documents, company’s set of values remained unchanged in over a long-time, questioning whether they have ever been negotiated or challenged.

Ranking these values as a defined set, wall-engraved, which although are well communicated, appear to be inevitable, creating risks of “performative alignment” rather than true commitment. Noteworthy, by framing the values as a moral imperative (‘passionate tribe members’) and stressing the leaders’ sole responsibility to embed and communicate

them, the company risks obscuring power dynamics (another critical tension), positioning compliance as an ethical commitment, if not well supported by practical systemic structure. Both employees and leaders highlight that value alignment is key to success, yet this could stifle innovation or critical feedback, an issue central to critiques of normative control, which are on the same time the main strengths of ST. However, accounts indicate that while values alignment appears as robust process in the organisation, it often lacks the analytical infrastructure to navigate complex values systems and ethical dilemma across diverse stakeholder groups. This raises a critical challenge:

*How can SL Cultivate true holistic values without enforcing conformity?*

Findings indicated that the limitations of SL in addressing this tension stem from its potential to overlook the dynamic nature of values and ethics in complex systems. Simply aligning individuals to a static pre-defined set of values may not be sufficient to cultivate the critical thinking and adaptive capacity needed for long-term SL implementation in complex, fast-changing environments. To address this, SSL reframes the ‘aligning values’ theme as ‘Co-Creating Values’ construct, developed through collective reflection and sense-making. This dimension recognises that within a systems thinking perspective, values are not static to be enforced but are continuously shaped through collective dialogue and shared understanding. It moves beyond passive acceptance to active participation in defining what the organisation stands for and what is ‘the right thing’. This supports Boje (2014) assertion - drawing from quantum organisation works (e.g., Wheatley, 1992; Senge, 1990; Zohar, 1990)- that narrative in organisations is a continuous “unfolding living process” (p.5). From an ST lens ( a quantum core element), this research argue that coherence should arise not from enforced alignment but from dynamic relationships, shared meaning-making, and emergent

sensemaking. This view challenges normative control approaches where values are imposed rather than co-constructed and constantly evolving across complex, adaptive systems.

Although framed as shared, values in Company X remain corporate-defined, often reflecting a top-down transmission and one-directional flow of values meaning, rather than critically reinterpreted or co-constructed. While alignment practices reinforces the perception of a value-led organisation, it could be interpreted as an attempt to shape stakeholder perspectives to secure ideological buy-in: Training is not just about skill, but values and language alignment; communication is not just about dialogue, but a ‘reinforcement of culture’ messages. (ESG, 2022, p.35 ), collaboration is strictly contingent on shared values and added value. This suggests that influence flows predominantly outward rather than being reciprocal. Even the development programs based on aligning SL principles extend to stakeholders, and risk privileging corporate ideology over critical inquiry, limiting space for dissent (Fleming, 2009).

Engaging employees and stakeholders in shaping and evolving values, can help to ensure that they are perceived as a meaningful guide rather than checklist for compliance. This highlights the importance of ST’s feedback loops in co-creating outcomes, where actions and perceptions are continuously re-evaluated based on systemic impact, enhancing a sustainable implementation of SL. This helps turn values from fixed set of rules into contextually adaptive, evolving principles, shaped by stakeholder experiences and sustainability drivers across the system (Sterman, 2000; Drath and Palus, 1994). ST by nature, resists single, dominant narratives by emphasising and making space for multiple critical interdependent viewpoints (Meadows, 2008). This helps organisations surface conflicting interpretations of values (e.g., sustainability, accountability) across departments, regions, and stakeholders preventing overreliance on emotionally appealing but contextually shallow values narratives.

For example: rather than accepting ‘doing the right thing’ as universally understood, ST encourages asking: *right for whom, in what system, and with what consequence?*

Promoting feedback loops can prevent values from becoming mere compliance mechanisms positioning them as tools for collective sensemaking. Moreso, ST distinguishes between symptoms (surface behaviours) and root causes (structural patterns), where the case company often falters. Corporate normative demand was found to often result in keeping problems hidden, through reluctance to raise uncomfortable points (12.EM.UK), and speaking up as some senior leaders tend to throw blames instead of focusing on collectively ‘fixing it’ (Participant x1, UK). The description of leadership as sometimes failing to look at the root cause of the problem ‘what’s been done wrong?, “having no clear direction for the business as whole” and feeling “less coordinated”(Participant x1; x2), suggests the espoused values may not always translate into effectively implemented practices. This highlight a critical systemic vulnerability in feedback loops and coordination of the ‘whole’, which can undermine SL transformative potential. Leaders also tend to emphasise belonging, alignment and standardisation without reference to understanding feedback loops, cause-effect relationships, or identifying leverage points, typical terms of systems thinking applications. Obscured by normative demand and corporate identity, this not only risk resistance to change: ‘relying on brand/history’ rather than proactive change (Participant x1), but may limit critical reflexivity, particularly on long standing corporate norms.

In all, although leadership is perceived as strong at times, these accounts flag the need for a more systemic approach to better coordinate decisions supported by stronger feedback loops, and cause root analysis to sustain the transformative potential of SL. Moreso, the framing of stakeholder engagement as helping to continually ‘refine’ systems and practices (ESG, 2022, p.38), implies incremental adjustment rather than a willingness to fundamentally challenge

entrenched power structures and dominant norms. For example, data found fragmentations in the tribal community, disparities in power highlighted in separate leadership office structure, some feeling exclusion from decisions and a few seniors still holding onto traditional hierarchical power. Such accounts hint at unresolved structural tensions, where commitments to inclusion may not necessarily translate into equitable influence on organisational decisions or systems co-redesign. This approach is closer to the concept of “single-loop learning”, present when the emphasis is on “techniques and making techniques more efficient”, where any reflection is directed toward making the existing strategy more effective (Usher and Bryant, 1989, p. 87).

Drawing from Argyris and Schön’s (1978) work, ST on the other hand, encourages “double-loop learning”, which occurs “when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organisation’s underlying norms, policies and objectives” (p.2). It involves not just changing actions but challenging underlying assumptions. In the context of values, this means employees and leaders are encouraged to challenge the assumptions embedded in value narratives, e.g., questioning whether making it ‘better than today’ (ESG, 2020, p.5) should also include challenging existing value metrics, power structures or environmental trade-offs that may be taken for granted (Argyris and Schön, 1978). Through ST, systemic SL recognises values as interconnected elements within larger systems, acknowledging how values translate across different organisational contexts. ST can help to redistribute agency, inviting employees and partners to participate in ongoing value negotiation to co-define values and monitor outcomes (*Inclusive M&E process*), across functions and regions. In this view, values are not mere static set of rules but relationally constructed ethical commitments that are responsive to systemic complexity, power imbalances, and cultural variation, contributing in part to each of the tensions.

This evolution is supported by Integrative Communication process, which helps to facilitate open multi-directional dialogue, narrative integration, and transparency, essential for genuine co-creation of values. It supports not just predefined value conformity but shared value sensemaking across regions and stakeholder groups, allowing values to evolve contextually while maintaining global coherence. These then can be reevaluated and renegotiated through Inclusive M&E, where its ST orientation allows for critical feedback channels that can create safe spaces for dissenting voices and support the continuous refinement of values implementation as organisational context changes. It ensures that the co-created values are not just theoretical constructs but are truly embraced and effective across all levels and diverse contexts, providing feedback loops for further adaptation. For instance, relating to employees having to “prove themselves” by internalising company values (19.EM.IR), ST would question which organisational structures (e.g., performance reviews, recognition systems) are incentivising this emotional conformity? Once the root cause is detected, the double feedback loops created through systemic processes like Integrative Communication and Inclusive M&E, can be used to redesign the system to reward questioning, ethical negotiation, and local interpretation of values instead. By incorporating these two paramount processes, the system can begin to detect when values alignment suppresses dissent or perpetuate power imbalances. This allows SL to retain its ethical foundation while avoiding cultural homogenisation, promoting broader diversity and ‘shared authority’.

Furthermore, Adaptive Learning process allows to cultivate the analytical skills necessary for systemic reflections on the relevance and adaptability of its co-created values, enabling continuous refinement and evolution as new insights emerge and dynamic contexts change. Whereas Systemic Innovative Collaboration provides the practical platforms and methodologies for groups to actively engage in the co-creation process, moving from abstract discussions to systemic co-created values principles. Together, the systemic processes

reframe SL from mere tool of normative cohesion to a systemic framework of contextual adaptability and ethical reflexivity, critical for addressing complex challenges like CS in diverse, dynamic environments.

In sum, the persistent question in the analysis of whether *'the company's holistic values function as equitable moral guides, or tools for normative alignment?'* is thus addressed: while SL values like 'making it better' (ESG, 2020) and 'serving others' were sincerely upheld, the implementation often enforced value alignment as a prerequisite for belonging, and empowerment, likely to result in limiting dissent or alternative moral interpretations. To address this, *Aligning Values* theme was evolved into Co-Creating Values dimensions, enabled by the four elaborated systemic processes, to ensure values were negotiated, not imposed. This can help reduce the risk of normative control, enabling values to act as a 'living' (Boje, 2014) ethical guidelines, unfolding and shaped by diverse stakeholders. Theoretically, a Systemic SL challenges this normative tension by positioning values not as fixed set but as a co-developed moral compass through inclusive systemic processes. All the other 5 evolved dimensions contribute in part to 'co-creating values', as presented along this chapter. For instance, a distributed agency across the organisation is also critical here, allowing for collective sense-making and adaptive 'shared moral authority' in place of hierarchical control, a tension that 'partnering leadership' often fails to address (discussed next).

### **6.2.2. Power Imbalance Tension: *From Influence to Shared Authority***

Building on the normative constraint to traditional SL sustainable implementation, the Power Imbalance Tension exposed the paradox of advocating empowerment while preserving hierarchical control.

The company leadership approach reflected how servant-leaders work closely with their teams to achieve individual/ team goals and organisational success. Leaders actively shared responsibilities based on competency levels, and values alignment, involving teams in idea-sharing (including ESG goals). This was said to foster trust, engagement, ownership (control of their own destiny ESG, 2020) and mutual accountability for executing the strategy, like in CS (everyone trying to bring ideas to the table 17.EM.UK). Many employees accounted of leaders operating from a position of humility and support, sharing responsibility with those who demonstrate alignment with SL values and possess the necessary competencies (04.ML.BL; 05.SL.NL; 20.LL.UK; 15.EM.UK; 27.EM.LX; 32.EM.LX). The company frames leadership as a partnership, that reflects Greenleaf's (2002) concept by enabling leaders to act as "first among equals" who prioritise follower growth and collective success (p.303). However, closer analysis of organisational dynamics reveals that company's SL frequently falls short of achieving genuine empowerment and can inadvertently perpetuate existing power imbalances. While the company highlights that under this 'partnering leadership', both leader and follower play a role in determining 'how things get done' (CEO Book, 2009, p.8), in participants experiences, it is enacted through supportive leader-driven coordination rather than shared power: "We work collaboratively with the team, but ultimately I make the final call" (05.SL.NL). Leaders often retain control over direction-setting, with employees seeing their role as participating in already defined direction: "We set the goals and then get teams on board to achieve the journey" (20.LL.UK). Delegation was often framed as contingent on a leader's assessment: "who to share responsibilities with depending on competency levels" (05.SL.NL).

Referring to leadership as a partnership reflects Greenleaf's concept of "partnership of following", fostering egalitarian collaboration for collective success (Greenleaf, 2002, p.303). While this egalitarian framing aims at supporting inclusivity and empowerment it may

also mask underlying power dynamics if differences in competencies or influence are not genuinely and fully acknowledged. On a more critical note, the formal word used by the company is 'Equity', with EDI+B programs offered to all to learn to manage biases. While this is a broader topic, drawing briefly from organisational justice literature, equality, refers here to strict egalitarianism, focusing on giving everyone the same tools; whereas equity focus on fairness, tailored to give everyone the tools they need to succeed (Konow et al., 2020). So, while the employees describe their leaders as 'acting equal', it reflects their reported perceptions of leaders' benevolent characters (tendency toward idealism and paternalism) such as, 'compassionate, kind, humble...', rather than the company's leadership approach on equity. Even leaders described their approach as an empathetic: "you need to have a high level of empathy, compassion and be there for your team on a personal level" (01.SL.US). As noted by Kabanoff (1991), equity may be viewed as "the means by which more powerful parties justify receiving a greater share of outcomes than weaker parties" (p. 435). This tension is gradually surfacing in how company SL idealises influence, leaders coach, support, model behaviour, and develop others, but the fundamental distribution of power and control often remains centralised.

While this 'partnering for success' practice is claimed to be based on mutual influence (CEO Book, 2009), leaders retain sole evaluative power (e.g., performance reviews), in assessing values alignment, competency and trust ('I proved myself' (19.EM.IR), before deciding who to delegate tasks to (04.ML.BL), reinforcing hierarchical control. Strict normative and competency criteria can narrow the scope for creative contributions and employees still building skills may be systematically marginalised, reinforcing informal hierarchies, as 'maturity' level is subjectively assessed by leaders. Furthermore, they might represent an oversimplification of follower dynamic subjective experiences, reduced to a check list in assessment reviews. Even when collaborative language was used, the framing often remained

leader-centric, with employees reported as needing to “adapt to the new systems and processes” (01.SL.US), “bringing them on board” (05.SL.NL), and “persuade them along” (12.ML.UK), suggesting limited room for co-creation or challenge. Employees language around “working together” to improve processes (14.EM.UK) frames it more as relational, rather than systemic, as in changing structures or power relations. It, therefore, may conceal potential systemic tensions that such continual adaptation may engender, particularly in balancing service and power. These partially answer the analysis question of who benefits most from current SL adaptations?

Employees acknowledged awareness of power asymmetries, as illustrated by the “leadership group and directors sit together, and our function sits separately” comment (17.EM.UK), illustrating the physical and symbolic ‘disconnect’ enforcing a hierarchal structure, which can undermine the very values of equity and empowerment the servant company aspires for. This reflects what Kabanoff (1991) critiques as the normative use of equity, where, while seemingly fair, often legitimises existing disproportionate power structures rather than redistribute influence. However, while leadership’ reliance on equity potentially masked power asymmetries under the guise of fairness, equality seems to be also compromised. Although many participants accounted for leaders’ genuine openness and shared leadership experience, others described exclusion, obedience, job insecurity, judgements and political blame, raising critical questions about the extent of employees’ empowerment and dissent, under the guise of partnership. These dynamics were not limited to internal hierarchies. Collaboration with external stakeholders was also filtered through rigid values compliance with ‘our Code of Conduct’ (ESG, 2022, p.17). Moreso, while stakeholder feedback and idea-sharing are formalised, it remains unclear how input consistently travel high up decision-making hierarchy, thus, in practice, the extent of followers and stakeholders influence remains unclear.

These power tensions are further enhanced by the inertia within organisational structures that may be perpetuating the status quo of power distribution, impeding deeper systemic change. Besides the spatial disconnection, this is further reinforced by accounts of internal fragmentation into “mini cultures” led by a few seniors in long established roles characterised by entitlement and directive leadership styles, “*not want [ing] to get involved... “just throwing orders”*”, that can stifle genuine empowerment, prioritising stability over growth (Participant X1), and profit over CS actions (11.SL.US). Another lower leader (Participant X2) describes a cultural norm at these senior levels who can “promote their voice to each other, but down in the ranks, it’s very subservient”. This suggests the existence of silos, that may operate with different norms, priorities or power dynamics, contradicting SL’s ‘first among equals’ vision (Greenleaf, 1977), and ST’s interdependence ethos, where internal subsystems (‘mini tribes’) operate independently from the whole organisation.

According to this manager (Participant X2), while such organisational structure “is all good from a stable environment”, from an individual level, it promotes “obedience”, to navigate these internal sub-cultures and ensure job security, which can suppress individual agency, creativity and risk-taking, leading employees to prioritise conformity: “I want to make sure I’m obedient, so I work another day.” This means that while this collaborative approach is designed to be dynamic, it may still reinforce power structures under the guise of partnership. Furthermore, accounts of the need to ‘be firm’ (04.ML.BL) ‘tough’(12.ML.UK), to ‘ensure business goals are met’ (20.LL.UK), further suggest that hierarchical impulses often re-emerge during pressure or unstable situations. These tensions reflect an informal hierarchy, indicating that SL alone may not sufficiently address power imbalances or challenge entrenched privileges, despite its inclusivity premise. Company’s SL often defaults to one-way influence from leaders to followers rather than fostering distributed moral agency, especially during complexities (e.g., deadlines, conflicts and unprecedented events

(26.ML.UK; 04.ML.BL; 05.SL.NL). Some leaders acknowledged the challenge of balancing “caring for people and performance” a tension inherent in SL’s dual focus on individuals’ growth and ‘best possible outcomes for everyone" (12.ML.UK; 20.LM.UK; 05.SL.LX).

These findings reveal that SL is not unconditional in practice, highlighting the challenge leaders face of balancing service and power, where ‘situational adaptability’ adjustment and occasional 'toughness' are needed, for the common good. By acknowledging the necessity of these measures, leaders shed some lights on ways to address the critics that pure SL might be impractical in competitive business environments with performance demands. Moreso, the recognition within leadership of the need for recruitment of new senior voices, top-down education, and mindset shift, indicate an emerging awareness of these challenges. The conditional approach to ‘partnership’ while reinforcing coherence, risks instrumentalising SL’s inclusive values as tools of strategic alignment rather than true ‘partnership of fellowship’. This can lead to performative participation, where employees feel heard but not truly empowered, hindering genuine partnership and limiting SL transformative potential.

Overall, the findings support critiques that, despite its collaborative and relational intent and the positive outcomes it yields- mainly in stable environments- SL lacks the operational depth to navigate people/ performance tensions and organisational complexity, particularly within large-scale settings (another critical tension). In global organisations, existing hierarchical power structures can be deeply entrenched, making it difficult for traditional SL to fundamentally alter these dynamics. Especially, when many more overlooked subcultures are possibly forming, undermining the goal of building an “interdependent tribe”. These insights reflect what Albakri and Wood-Harper (2025) critique as a blind spot in many ST applications: the tendency to overlook how deep-rooted power imbalances shape systemic interactions and constrain transformation. In this case, while “partnership” was claimed, it

often meant compliance with leadership's vision rather than genuine influence on strategic direction. Thus, the tension between genuine empowerment and normative control remains a key consideration in SL evolution towards a more systemically inclusive, structurally transformative leadership. This tension seemingly arises when leaders, despite their service orientation, retain ultimate decision-making authority, and the inherent power structures within the organisation remain largely unchallenged. Balancing these dynamics is crucial for aligning the company's cultural narrative with inclusive, impactful practices, necessitating a fundamental systemic interventions to introduce fresh thinking/ mindset and challenge established norms from the roots.

To address power imbalances, the research proposes evolving '*Partnering Leadership*' theme into 'Sharing Moral Authority'- a systemic SL behavioural dimension that shifts from top-down influence into a collective moral agency. This evolution aims at directly addressing entrenched power structures, enabling a more democratic, distributed approach to leadership. This shift to 'Sharing Moral Authority' represents a theoretical reframing of how power dynamics are conceptualised and managed within organisations, inspired by Greenleaf's (2002) vision that "authority should be granted by those being served" (p.5). This distinction between power and 'moral authority' is crucial, while power can be imposed, moral authority must be earned and freely given. He explained that moral authority is "mutually developed and shared" through a partnership of equality which sees every follower as an important part of the organisation rather than as a means to execute the leader's wishes (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 5-6).

The evolved SSL dimension aims at reconciling the tension between empowerment and normative control, by reframing leadership not as directing followers, with the leader acting as benevolent figure, but as part of a distributed system of service guided by co-created

values. It expands the understanding of partnership beyond mere influence and coordination toward co-ownership of outcomes, distributing influence, agency, and responsibility across the system. Here, “authority” is not derived from formal position or control, but from a moral capacity to influence shared purpose and decisions, rooted in trust, systems awareness, and ethical alignment. Sharing moral authority demands that leadership becomes structurally inclusive, enabling others to shape agendas and initiate change, especially in context-sensitive efforts that span regions.

Enabled by the systemic process of Systemic Innovative Collaboration, this evolved SSL dimension shifts focus from interpersonal partnership and teamwork, repositioning moral authority as relational and co-constructed effort, requiring leaders to engage in mutual accountability and stakeholder empowerment. It helps breaking the top-down flow by supporting not just alignment with the company’s predefined standards, but co-creation with external partners to shape innovation, not just implement it. For instance, stakeholder engagement that invites dissenting views (even anonymous) and encourages mutual evaluation and co-creation rather than enforcing alignment with a predefined values, is crucial to making sustainability efforts both participatory and adaptive.

Shared Moral Authority theoretically evolves the servant-leadership dimension of power distribution through a systems lens. This theoretical elaboration suggests that truly systemic servant leadership would approach authority not as something to be occasionally shared, in stable conditions, but as inherently distributed throughout the system based on moral principles, competence and mutually earned trust, rather than title. It is supported by Inclusive Monitoring and Evaluation systemic process which ensures that power distribution is equitable and that all voices are genuinely heard in co-defining success and assessing

progress and impact. This challenges the current dynamic where feedback loops fail to question the assumption behind centralisation of power.

SSL, through ST encourages ongoing double-leaning loops and root cause analysis, allowing for diverse context-sensitive perspectives to rebalance power and surface power asymmetries and hidden tensions across regions, including interdepartmental friction or conflicting stakeholder needs. For instance, employees' insight showed that " closer physically space with manager would positively change relationships" (17.EM.UK), indicating one of the root cause problems that are often kept hidden (20.LL.UK; 26.ML.UK). This highlights the need to rethink how leadership proximity could impact the perception and distribution of moral authority; in turn it reinforces the relevance of Co-Creating Values by enabling diverse stakeholders to exercise their earned shared authority in interpreting and co-defining values. Integrative Communication is also vital for transparent discussions about roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes, ensuring clarity and fairness in the distribution of authority. Whereas Adaptive Learning process allows the organisation to continuously adjust its power dynamics based on experience and outcomes, ensuring that the distribution of authority remains effective and equitable in evolving contexts.

However, while shared Moral authority play a critical role in addressing power tension, alongside co-creating values that provides it with the moral compass, organisations must also systemically develop capacities, ensuring people have both the voice and the tools to influence, and to earn authority. The original theme of 'coaching and support' focused on the leader's role in offering personalised guidance, developmental feedback, and emotional support (08.EM.UK; 04.ML.BL). On the surface, these behaviours promoted relational trust, psychological safety, personal growth and wellbeing, developing a bench of future servant leaders capable of benefiting others. However, they also revealed a limitation in SL's scope:

support was often constrained to the leader/follower dyad and often lacks the framework to scale its strength in interpersonal development across complex organisations. Moreover, organisational learning platforms and training sessions, tended to focus on SL values reinforcement, situational adaptability and siloed skills courses, rather than equipping individuals with analytical and systems-oriented tools needed to navigate cross-regional complexities. As a result, support and coaching risked remaining interpersonal and reactive, often prioritising role-specific development rather than systemic capacity-building. Specifically, company's SL frames support as leader-led mentoring, which reinforces dependency and subtly maintains positional authority. Coaching is built on assessments system of employees' ongoing growth and competencies to ensure leaders can confidently delegate (04.ML.BL;12.ML.UK;05.SL.NL), keeping the centralisation of power ongoing rather than addressing it from the roots. Also, the framing of mistakes within such strict values adherence systems, risks suppressing employees' agency and risk-taking to maintain conformity. Moreso, some employees reported inconsistencies in support and coaching (06.EM.UK; 28.EM.UK), indicated that SL practices may be unevenly applied across certain teams or regions (05.SL.NL), undermining systemic cohesion. These limitations highlight the need to improve developmental efforts to ensure all employees feel equally supported.

To address these limitations, this theme evolves 'Coaching and Support' into the dimension of 'Systemic Support and Development', which incorporates systems thinking to create developmental systems that transcend individual leader-follower relationship. By embedding growth opportunities within adaptive, system-wide structures, it addresses the limitation of traditional coaching approaches in their overly dependence on individual leader capacity and direct relationships, recognising development as occurring within interconnected systems rather than in isolation (Day and Dragoni, 2015; Senge, 1990).

This shift is operationalised through the ‘Adaptive Learning’ and ‘Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation’ processes, which embed systemic thinking in learning practices, and incorporate multiple sources of insight (team, leader, stakeholder and contextual), into development pathways. Drawing on ST lens, it fosters feedback-rich environments and cross-regional learning loops (Day and Dragoni, 2015) that surface hidden development gaps and asymmetries in access, and promote dynamic, equitable access to support, resources and mentorship across the system, based on actual evolving needs, not just perceived competency and trust.

This ensures development is not contingent on leaders’ benevolence (which may vary between leaders), or local Western norms (that characterises SL), but contextually responsive and systemically reinforced. This dimension also challenges power asymmetries by supporting underrepresented voices, making learning, growth and autonomy pathways transparent, inclusive and systemic, not conditional on alignment or on leader discretion. By shifting focus to cultivating collective capacity-building to engage with interdependent systems, it recognises institutional and double-loop learning as central to sustained systemic transformation (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Senge, 2006).

Moreover, this reframing incorporates the phrase Rieser (1995) argument that “the process of change starts in here, in the servant, not out there” (p. 56), the inner character, but it should also create organisational pathways for that character to evolve through practice, reflection, and collaboration enabled by a ‘shared Moral Authority’ co-creative approach. Together they empower individuals at all levels with the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence to effectively exercise this shared authority, ensuring that the capacity for authority is cultivated throughout the system, not just at the top. This is crucial for addressing structural power

asymmetries, breaking down hierarchical silos and fostering more inclusive, systems-aware servant leadership.

Accordingly, it addresses the question in the analysis of whether SL companies can draw a line between top-down leadership and balanced power dynamics that allow self-identity?

Answer: Possible, but only if SL evolves to systemically distribute moral agency and developmental pathways rather than reinforce leader-centric authority. ‘Shared Moral

Authority’ offers a promising systemic solution, challenging and transforming the structural foundation of organisational power to foster genuine empowerment, accountability, and a more adaptive, inclusive, and systems-aware leadership/ culture. This redistribution is crucial for navigating complexity, where systems cannot be changed by a few, but only by many.

Here, ‘Systemic Support and Development also play a critical role in equipping leaders and employees with the relevant analytical skills to better respond to contextual variation, uncertainty, and complexity, guided by co-created values and ethics.

### **6.2.3. Complexity Navigation Tension: *From Situational Responsiveness to Systems-Aware Leadership***

The previous tensions surfaced critical traditional SL paradoxes: cohesion/ conformity, empowerment/ authority, service/ performance. This build-up revealed its limitations in unstable environments, especially when faced by complex situations. Traditional SL, while effective in fostering strong leader-follower relationships and addressing immediate needs, often falls short when faced with modern organisational complexities across global, dynamic, and interconnected systems. This tension arises when the focus remains primarily on individual interactions or localised problem-solving, struggling to effectively address deep interdependencies and challenges inherent in complex global environments. It can lead to siloed solutions, where interventions in one area inadvertently create problems elsewhere in

the system, and where self/ leader-follower awareness and a purely situational approach to leadership are often insufficient.

This potential to underemphasise the broader systemic context can hinder the organisation's ability to anticipate future challenges, innovate effectively, and respond and adapt holistically to crises. This reflects a broader limitation of SL in unstable environments: while it supports self-awareness and ethical concern, it does not equip individuals to analyse or navigate systemic complexity. Traditional SL emphasises 'expanding awareness' but often lacks the analytical framework to comprehend complex systemic interactions. Its emphasis on 'situational adaptability' theme reflects a responsive mindset yet often limits action to interpersonal dynamics or task-specific flexibility. The respective evolution of these two themes into SSL 'Developing Systems Awareness' and 'Adaptive Serving' dimensions is specifically theoretically designed to address this tension. This move shifts the focus from isolated events to patterns and structures, enabling more holistic problem-solving.

'Expanding Awareness' emerged as a theme through leaders' and employees' emphasis on reflection, empathy, and ethical foresight. However, much of this awareness focused on immediate stakeholders or community impact, with limited articulation of systemic interdependencies, feedback loops, or root analysis. Awareness is treated more as emotional sensitivity with individualistic focus rather than structural insight, often failing to account for systemic patterns and emergent properties. The company reports taking a transformational, 'systemic' collaborative approach to CS (ESG, 2022, p.8), and leaders frequently refer to "seeing the bigger picture" (09.CEO.US), "being part of the whole" (20.LL.UK), and "holistic viewpoints" (12.ML.UK). On a surface level, these narratives may imply systems awareness, yet analysis of lived participants' experiences reveals that implementation tends to lean more towards normative alignment and standardisations than fundamental structural

change. It continually relies on ‘unified mindset’, ‘refining strategy’ and ‘optimising systems and processes’ (ESG, 2022, pp.9-11, p.58), over rethinking their foundations.

Initiatives tend to focus on technical solutions like waste reduction, feedback collection, siloed community initiatives and selective partnerships, reflecting a preference for low-risk incremental than transformative change. Furthermore, while participants reference being “part of that big ecosystem” concept (e.g., 26.ML.UK; 27.EM.LX), these tend to be generalised and not accompanied by concrete evidence of systemic interventions or independent conceptual understanding of ST’s principles. For instance, sustainability was often understood as “environmental” rather than as an integrated CS system (27.EM.LX). The siloed understanding about what sustainability means and around innovating and improving products and packaging was also documented (ESG, 2022, p. 58). This fragmentation suggests that while the organisation’s training fosters ethical and relational values, it does not sufficiently develop a shared systems-oriented understanding of sustainability or innovation across global regions. This gap was further evidenced in senior accounts: “many of them still think that for the plant-based formula we're good, and it is not the case” (11.SL.US).

Company’s implementation pattern, as such, exposes SL’s limited systemic depth in understanding the ripple effects of decisions across interconnected systems, social, environmental, and economic. For instance, holistic innovation (ESG 2020, p.48) addresses symptoms (e.g., packaging efficiency and product waste through Smart \*\*\* design) while ignoring systemic root causes (e.g., continued reliance on and aluminium canisters, and single-use delivery systems that maintains the same linear production and resource-intensive system that conflicts with principles of sustainable resource use, limiting its potential to drive broader long-term sustainable transformation (2022 Annual Report, p.4). This example

reflects a pattern where innovation is framed in terms of functionality and brand performance, but not as means for tackling deeper issues or structural changes (p.3), limiting the company's systemic responsiveness to environmental and social challenges. These highlight that systems-level tensions were either overlooked or inadequately addressed, answering the analysis inquiry about: *whether leaders are potentially overlooking the tensions inherent in systems interactions?*

It further indicates that though SL successfully fosters cohesion through values alignment and community-building, it lacks the systemic analytical tools to translate this into contextual-structural change, where 'Developing Systems Awareness' becomes a core SSL dimension, equipping leaders to perceive and integrate systemic tensions rather than suppressing them. This evolution incorporates systems thinking to develop capacity needed to perceive patterns, relationships, and interdependencies within the organisation and its external ecosystem. As such, creating mechanisms for collective sensemaking and shared understanding, not just developing internal 'talents and capabilities' to pursue company's ESG objectives and isolated innovative efforts (ESG, 2022, p.18). For instance, rather than perceiving reducing plastic initiatives as isolated team-level efforts or short-term technical fixes, it equips individuals to trace how packaging design affects waste levels, stakeholder trust, supplier working conditions, and broader community wellbeing. This broader awareness fosters more intentional, interconnected decision-making across multi-levels, rethinking structural foundations and establishing feedback loops that continuously refine systemic perception and shared understanding. This shift enables employees to see sustainability not as a task, but as a dynamic system of interdependent impacts. Furthermore, this necessary shift is likely to equip individuals to understand the broader systemic implications of values, ensuring that co-created values are responsive to internal and external environmental and social dynamic contexts to form shared moral principles.

While the strategic emphasis on leadership education, holistic innovation, and stakeholder communication aims to develop capability for innovation, much of it remains top-down, one-way and shaped by predetermined values. Overlooking such systemic cause-relationships, risks reducing SL's processes to mechanisms of soft control rather than empowering systemic reflexivity, limiting innovation and adaptability. 'Developing Systems Awareness' dimension can help individuals understand how power operates within the organisational system, enabling them to identify and actively challenge existing imbalances, fostering a more fair and equitable distribution of influence. Such an approach echoes Greenleaf's (1977) assertion that servant leaders must be 'disturbers and awakeners' rather than passive consensus builders. This evolved dimension maintains ethical reflexivity (Hardy et al., 2001) at the core of SL, while aiming at strengthening its transformative potential, engaging multiple stakeholder perspectives, and embedding long-term change across contexts/regions. In short, SL principles of empathy, awareness and service remain valuable, but insufficient without integration of systemic awareness, decentralised feedback, and analytical capability to navigate dynamic complexity.

Additionally, navigating the Complexity Tension required transcending SL's reactive 'Situational Adaptability' that flexed interpersonal styles (26.ML.UK) within rigid processes (e.g., reviews). The underlying SL tension in this area lies in its reliance on ethical intent and interpersonal adaptability, which remain contingent on alignment with wider business objectives and company values in "any situation" (e.g., 39.EM.NL;05.SL.NL), suggesting normative control over genuine systems adaptability. While this may ensure varied behaviours remain ethical, it may also signal an element of normative control, where freedom to adapt is acceptable only so far as it aligns with the organisation's goals and values. SSL addresses this by embedding service within systemic context, not abandoning ethics but extending them through ST. The theoretical evolution from 'Situational

Adaptability' theme to 'Adaptive Serving' SSL dimension reflects a broader systems orientation, where leaders serve not only individuals but the system they are part of. It enables leaders to balance competing system goals (e.g., local needs vs. global ESG priorities) while maintaining core values.

Such shift was found as theoretically necessary, as several leaders acknowledged SL's practical tensions between maintaining SL ideals and responding to pragmatic demands: "I can give you 3 or 4 examples of unforeseen incidents at work only from today that makes servant leadership hard to implement at times" (05.SL.NL); with business realities requiring them to sometimes "change behaviour" to balance between serving, power and collective achievement (25.ML.UK; 04.ML.BL). In such framing, adaptability risks becoming a legitimising narrative for traditional authority rather than real power redistribution, responding to the analysis inquiry of whether the adaptability narrative can be viewed as a strategy to reconcile conventional managerial control with SL values? Adaptive Serving reflects not just flexible behaviours, but deeper context-sensitive and stakeholder-responsive service.

By acknowledging the necessity of these situational adjustments, leaders affirm the critics that pure SL might be impractical in competitive business environments with performance demands. Moreso, adaptability is framed as a competency that employees are 'held accountable for': "we hold our employees accountable to learn and adjust as well" (22.SL.UK), suggesting more of a managerial requirement rather servant-led developmental process, which risks instrumentalising adaptability as a performance measure. In short, 'Adaptive Serving' evolves from merely serving immediate individual needs to serving the needs of the entire system, anticipating future complexities and long-term impacts and adapt to broader regional contexts rather just immediate situations, through standardised,

incremental strategies (a scalability tension addressed next). This means making decisions that benefit the whole system, even if it requires short-term sacrifices (e.g., of overly idealistic SL behaviours) in specific areas. The complexity navigation capacity of SSL- through Adaptive Serving and Developing Systems Awareness- lies on transforming this normatively bounded situational adaptability into distributed ethical agency informed by systems awareness. Leaders must be able to trace how decisions across timelines, functions, regions and stakeholder groups interact, and help followers do the same. This requires co-created values, structured reflection, and shared power- hallmarks of the new SSL framework.

Adaptive Learning and Integrative Communication systemic processes are critical enablers for navigating complexity. Learning, while positive in fostering employee development, is framed around an emphasis on learning ‘velocity’ (p. 2), rooted in performance and agility but lacks the integration of deeper systems literacy or the development of critical thinking for a system-wide transformation. One leader’s framing illustrates this imbalance: “We need to continue to educate employees around the world, so they have the same information and mindset... then they'll make better decisions” (01.SL.US). While well-intentioned, this reflects a unidirectional pattern rooted in standardisation, rather than the emergent, co-created insight advocated by ST. For example, education efforts focus on “serving specific individual needs” (20.LL.UK), and many employees see sustainability narrowly (e.g., plant-based = sustainable) (11.SL.US; 27.EM.LX). This indicates low systems awareness, despite high situational awareness.

Adaptive Learning is essential for continuously learning from complex situations, adjusting strategies, and adapting approaches based on real-time feedback from the system. It fosters this dual evolution through cross-boundary feedback loops, double-loop learning and root

cause analysis rather than surface-level adjustments, allowing systemic patterns to surface, and turning dissent and divergent perspectives into inputs for reflection, not misalignment. It turns challenges like conflicting stakeholder expectations, shifting environmental pressures, or cross-functional silos into opportunities for collective learning. When teams diverge from company ESG goals due to local realities, these tensions are captured and translated into strategic learning. By shifting focus to cultivating collective capacity-building to engage with interdependent systems, Adaptive Learning process facilitates developing Systems Awareness, equipping individuals to anticipate ripple effects across stakeholders, timelines, and functions, not just react to immediate circumstance/ situation (Senge, 2006). For instance, inconsistencies in employee education, and ESG awareness, highlighted by reported gaps and siloed understanding, are seen not just as training or communication issues, but systemic blind spots (Albakri and Wood-Harper, 2025), requiring organisational reflection.

Integrative Communication, in turn, enables system-level awareness to circulate across organisational boundaries and beyond, allowing for context-sensitive adaptation. Leaders noted the importance of seeing the “bigger picture” (09 .CEO.US), but this awareness was not always mirrored in employees’ experiences, despite frequent references to aligned language. This suggests that information flows downward to create cohesion but may not be structured to incorporate diverse or upward dissenting insights, undermining complexity responsiveness. Integrative Communication ensures that information about complex interdependencies, emerging patterns, and potential systemic risks is shared broadly and transparently across the organisation, fostering a shared understanding of the broader complexities and localised adaptive serving strategies.

Systemic Innovative Collaboration process complements this by promoting interdisciplinary innovative solutions for complex, interconnected challenges, ensuring adaptability serves

collective transformation, not just top-down adjustment, e.g., between marketing and sustainability teams to co-design solutions that account for both brand value and environmental values. Then, Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation helps assess the impact of adaptive interventions not just on isolated parts but on the entire system, providing crucial feedback loops to refine strategies and ensure systemic coherence.

The dual evolution Developing Systems Awareness and Adaptive Serving, marks a crucial theoretical shift from reactive, interpersonal flexibility to structural, system-aware leadership practice. While SL encourages leaders to listen and adapt based on the needs of others, SSL expands this to include ethical, cross-level decision-making in volatile and unstable contexts. These SSL's dimensions, fuelled by the Systemic processes, embed contextual, systemic literacy at the core of organisational SL. This approach treats emergent contradictions as innovation opportunities, where Adaptive Serving becomes imperative, abandoning SL's sacrificial behaviours to prioritise systemic integrity.

For example, Company X claimed working with a company named \*\*\* to reduce packaging: the cross-regional R&D teams engaged in Systemic Innovative Collaboration to co-redesign production models with \*\*\*. At this point, Systems Awareness maps ripple effects (e.g., material reduction → faster assembly → decreased energy use → lower carbon emissions → enhanced ESG performance), converting localised solutions into regenerative loops that address root causes rather than symptoms. This demonstrates how integrating Systems Thinking shifts complex sustainability challenges from isolated efficiency gains to interconnected organisational transformation.

Together, Adaptive Serving + Developing Systems Awareness + systemic processes enable the Complexity Navigation outcome within SSL, grounding ethical consideration in distributed learning, and regional adaptation. This helps expand the practical and analytical

capacity of SL to operate at scale, moving beyond relational, values-driven approach into a system-aware, context-sensitive dynamic leadership, contributing further to address the next scalability tension.

#### **6.2.4. Scalability Tension: *From Idealism to Systemic Implementation***

This stage presents the accumulative efforts of addressing the previous normative, power imbalance and complexities navigation tensions, paving the way to address these scalability and implementation limitations. This final tension of scalability poses a significant challenge to the sustained implementation of servant-leadership. This challenge of scaling SL across diverse, dynamic contexts is among the most revealing tests of its long-term systemic implementation potential. While acknowledging the limitations of this study in addressing all critiques, the focus here is on the relevant challenges directly impacting SL's sustained implementation in complex, dynamic organisations, particularly in areas such as adaptability, perceived idealism and scalability.

In the literature, SL was often framed idealistically, leading to its interpretation as a philosophy better suited for small, close-knit groups rather than complex, large-scale companies. Eva et al. (2019), highlight SL's perceived impracticality for large-scale, competitive environments due to the lack of clear frameworks for implementation. Zhang et al. (2023) further argue that large organisations may struggle with the demands for deep relationship building and individualised attention inherent in SL. This implementation gap is heightened in manufacturing organisations, where the interdependencies of regional variability, inherent hierarchical structures and productivity pressures (Rho et al., 2001) create creating significant implementation barriers. These challenges often result from traditional SL implementation approaches that fail to address the unique demands of manufacturing fast-paced environments, such as decision speed and chain of command

requirements (Gupta et al., 2020). Such conditions engender systemic pressures that traditional SL, with its emphasis on service and humility, is not always structurally equipped to navigate. These tensions are intensified in international contexts, where regional variations and power distance create additional complexity, impacting the scalability and sustainable leadership implementation (Bhanot et al., 2017). These limitations become particularly evident when attempts to unify leadership philosophy globally- such as with the case company (ESG, 2022)- results in homogenisation, rather than meaningful contextual integration.

While SL offers a strong ethical and relational foundation, analysis of its application in the large, international case organisations exposed limitations in structure, responsiveness, and contextual adaptability. Company X data reflect this tensions clearly, with its strong emphasis on global cultural cohesion, consistently describing SL as “the common philosophy throughout our organisation where ever you go, America, Asia, Europe..” regardless of regional variation (11.SL.US). Others pointing to initiatives such as “education and collaboration” aiming to instil a “unified mindset” across all regions (ESG, 2022, p.9). While well-intentioned, this standardisation imposed a unidirectional framework on what are inherently context-specific needs such as for equity (Western Vs Middle East) and CS drivers. As one leader stated, “We can always teach them to do the job, it’s more important to have aligned values” (05.SL.NL). While this illustrates trust in values-based culture, it also reveals how alignment may unintentionally undervalue context-sensitive insight (often western into other cultures) and restrict flexibility and opportunities for local innovation.

Moreso, the fragmentation across departments (mini ‘tribes’), separate leader-follower sittings and uneven leadership behaviour, reveal inconsistent application of SL across teams, functional and regional boundaries. Specifically, during complexities (e.g., crisis, deadlines,

conflicts and unprecedented events), many leaders admitted shifting to directive approaches to meet the demands of fast-paced real business environments (26.ML.UK; 04.ML.BL; 05.SL.NL; 11.SL.US). Some described leadership approaches as “very much dependent on the leader” (05.SL.NL), others stressed that occasional ‘toughness’ is needed, for the common good (20.ML.UK; 09.SL.US), while others contented with “I hope my leadership style is appropriate to the situation” (12.ML.UK). These insights suggest that SL is unevenly enacted, and hard to maintain without some sort of situational adjustments, or dropping SL behaviours altogether, enforcing critics of it being more a philosophy than a scalable practice. This challenge represents a significant sustainable implementation paradox- the tendency for SL initiatives to regress to traditional approaches to respond to global business realities.

Overall, empirical findings from Company X case study, demonstrated that the limitations of traditional SL in achieving true scalability in practice, stem from its leader-centric rather than system-centric approach. Such a model heavily reliant on individual benevolent character, emotional influence or specific varying leader behaviours would struggle to translate effectively across diverse global organisational departments and external environments. This is evidenced in the company’s uniform approach, while aiming for alignment, can unintentionally impose interpretations that contradict ST’s emphasis on contextual adaptation and emergence, hindering SL’s potential to translate effectively across diverse contexts.

At the core of addressing this tension is the evolution of the last ‘*Building Community*’ theme, into the 6<sup>th</sup> SSL dimension of ‘Interconnected Community-Building’. The old theme prioritises internal cohesion and shared values, yet failed to acknowledge normative pressures, systemic diversity and power asymmetries that can inadvertently limit local adaptation. The company’s efforts to ‘optimise’ processes and systems for a unified mindset, revealed a push towards global normative cohesion that not only undervalues regional

variation, but also often neglects structural tensions like fragmentation or power disparities. While employees spoke positively about “feeling part of something bigger” and a sense of belonging to the ‘tribe’ (05.SL.NL; ESG, 2022), some also expressed reservations about physical and relational disconnection, with spatial separation reinforcing status hierarchies (e.g.,17.EM.UK). Furthermore, the large size and market volatility of the organisation highlighted significant constraints, leading to difficulties such as in including everyone (19.EM.IR) and slow communication across departments and regions (26.ML.UK; 17.EM.UK). These structural barriers were found to directly undermine SL’s principles of awareness (05.SL.NL), responsiveness (04.ML.BL), and community, exasperated by complex situations: “It can become a bit fragmented...we could probably work harder at building the kind of community within the organisation” (12.LL.UK). As such, limiting leaders’ ability to adaptively serve the broader community at scale, and often resulting in abandoning SL behaviours: “Servant leadership is here, but there are other skills needed as well” (12.ML.UK), for the common good (20.ML.UK; 28.LL.LX; 26.ML.UK). While serving individuals and the common good is important, a lack of systemic perspective meant that leaders address symptoms rather than root causes or that their efforts, however well-intentioned, do not scale, or may have unintended consequences across the wider organisation or its external environment. Company’s SL’s emphasis on community often fosters strong bonds within immediate teams, but in large, complex organisations, this can inadvertently lead to isolated or “separate mini tribes” (Participant X1). This fragmentation undermines perceived organisational coherence (17.EM.UK; 26.ML.UK) and can impede an even and sustainable diffusion of SL principles, as well as foundational systemic change (20.LL.UK).

These challenges are echoed by a few of critical voices within leadership, expressing a desire for a structural change (Participant x4, Fr), need for a “mindset shift (11.SL.US), a “change management” (26.ML.UK), or the need to “recruit new people at senior levels” (05.SL.NL).

Yet, the practical application of this mindset remains constrained by formal hierarchies, top-down reviews, and limited stakeholder co-design (infrequent feedback). The company's own acknowledgement that "diverse interpretations exist" in the organisation globally around innovation and sustainability (p.58) further indicates the limits of standardised solutions, at effectively scaling SL across regions.

Acknowledging, as reveal in the findings, that a fragmented community cannot effectively scale shared values, practices, or systemic change, therefore, fostering genuine interconnectedness becomes foundational for widespread SL implementation and impact. The SSL addresses this by introducing the theoretically elaborated 'Interconnected Community-Building' dimension. While the original theme focused on trust and relationships within teams, this evolved dimension expands this into a multi-level, multi-actor system of relationships. It redefines community not just as internal cohesion, but as a distributed network of employees, leaders, departments, and external stakeholders, co-creating meaning, adapting together, and contributing to systemic learning and transformation. Rather than attempting to scale SL through universal replication of values or behaviours, SSL proposes that scale emerges from "interdependency", where various stakeholders align around shared growth and purpose while remaining responsive to local contexts. The systemic orientation of this evolved dimension aligns with systems thinking principles of wholeness, interdependence, root-cause analysis and feedback loops, essential for organisational adaptability and transformation (Senge, 1990; Meadows, 2008).

SL, when interpreted through a systems lens, promotes relationship-building with external constituencies and recognises the organisation as part of a broader societal and environmental system. Greenleaf urged leaders to acknowledge that "all human endeavour, including the business, is part of the larger and richer fabric of the whole universe" (c.f. Zohar, 2002, p.

120), while Wheatley (1998) argued that servant leaders must “reach out for relationships with others to create systems” (p. 348). In doing so, it directly addresses the limitations of traditional SL’s application reliant on individual relationships by embedding leadership within broader, interdependent systems of mutual influence and ethical accountability. In so, it aligns with Fullan’s (2004) challenge to develop strategies to “generate more and more leaders who could think and act with the bigger picture in mind”, which is stressed as the key to enhancing the conditions for sustainable leadership implementation (p.12). However, it is not enough to just use ST language, but it is most important to think and act in in systems. As one senior leader stated: “We all have to play our own part to influence that particular part of the wheel” (26.ML.UK). While this suggests conceptual alignment with ST, it does not clearly translate into structural redesign or distributed agency. While the strategic aim of the company is to develop capability for ‘systemic transformation’ (ESG, 2022, p.17), much of it remains top-down, one-way and shaped by predetermined values. Furthermore, initiatives tend to focus ‘alignment’, ‘testing /optimising/ refining systems’ (ESG, 2022, pp.9-11, p.58), and ‘getting employees to adapt’ (01.SL.US), rather than on co-redesigning; or on technical solutions like plastic reduction, siloed community initiatives and selective partnerships (ESG 2020, p.48), rather than integrated cross-regional co-design. Even, company’s “geographic expansion” focuses largely on driving revenue and speed of penetration without reflecting on context-sensitive market integration strategy (not accounted for even in Scope 3 reporting). or systemic root implication (ESG, 2022, p.3). This suggests a one-way alignment and growth model, lacking co-creation, contextual consideration or local insights, despite acknowledging difference in CS drivers, while deeper systemic issues remain insufficiently addressed, such as normative control (e.g., compliance assessments and reviews) structural power imbalances (*e.g., long-serving senior leaders with entrenched mini culture or top-down communication (26.ML.UK); physical disconnection (17.EM.UK)*); or regional

dynamics (e.g., *inconsistent cross-region communication and engagement, where some reported limited access to sustainability information (19.EM.UK), uneven involvement/interest in ESG efforts across regions (40.EM.FR), and decisions made strictly between senior leadership and specific R&D members with no evidences of local insights (38.EM.UK; 20.LL.UK)*). These patterns point to a tendency to address surface-level symptoms (*like plastic reduction or collecting sporadic feedback*) rather than the systemic root causes (*like entrenched hierarchical cultures that could hinder decentralised decision-making, community, and regional adaptability*).

Greenleaf warned that failure to see the wider picture “is the cause of ethical failure, made one decision at a time” (1996, p. 318). Sipe and Frick’s (2009) explains that through this lens, servant-leaders cultivate “heightened awareness... to see connections between history, people, events, possibilities, and deep intuition” (p. 176), enabling them to respond not merely to immediate problems, but to the deeper systemic patterns from which those problems emerge. Leaders must therefore be capable of anticipating ripple effects and long-term systemic consequences, strong strengths of ST’s principle of root-cause analysis. Through ST lens, SL leaders are called to “understand relationships between people, processes, structures, belief systems and a host of other factors” (Sipe and Frick, 2009, p. 179), recognising that systems, not silos, determine sustainable outcomes.

This integrated systems mindset allows SSL leaders to move beyond reactive leadership to proactive leadership while maintaining strong ethical foundation as stressed by scholars (e.g., Meadows, 2008). Leaders who can “zoom out” to grasp the wider picture are better positioned to take personal moral responsibility for the long-term outcomes of their decisions (Sipe and Frick, 2009). Seeing the wider picture is viewed as an ethical responsibility, enabling leaders “to make predictions that can guide people to a better future” (Kim, 2004, p.

203). From an SSL perspective, this means not simply engaging employees, but recognising how interconnection is shaped by culture, systems, leadership norms, and wider societal and environmental dynamics. Leaders who enact this systemically oriented community dimension are not merely integrating people; they are cultivating *communities of systems*: interdependent relationships that can sense, interpret, and respond to emergent challenges, shaped every day and everywhere simultaneously through live interactions (Boje, 2014). As Greenleaf (1977) noted, “in the compact between servant-leader and the led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share” (p. 50). This shared search for wholeness make the foundational premise of the SSL approach to cohesion, not as a mere internal cohesive effort but as a wider relational system that extends across teams, hierarchies, and external constituencies.

As mindset shift and education at multi-levels are believed to “change the way every department work” (11.SL.US), fostering system-thinking mindset and behaviour at every level could transform the context within which SL enacts. It enables SSL leaders to act ethically and systematically during complexity, not by standardising behaviours but by cultivating strong interconnectedness and interdependencies amongst diverse stakeholders through co-created values and adaptive, long-term goals. Importantly, this integrated vision directly counters the tendency of SL to regress into traditional, hierarchical leadership approaches, especially in complex environments. Instead of relying on formal authority, SSL cultivates an interconnected leadership system where influence is distributed, ethics are co-created, and sustainable implementation is achieved through systemic cohesion rather than top-down normative control, enabling collective accountability to uphold SL principles and drive context- sensitive CS over time.

However, as this ‘interdependency’ cannot be sustained by values alone, it therefore, must be supported by processes that ensure live interactions (Boje, 2014), and cross-contextual adaptation, where Systemic Innovative Collaboration becomes critical. This process goes beyond typical cross-functional cooperation by integrating cross-regional teams, external partners, and diverse knowledge systems, enabling a network of shared learning and scalable problem-solving. It activates co-creation at scale, connecting local experimentation with global learning. For example, cross-regional R&D (e.g., bio-materials collaboration (11.SL.US)), demonstrates how local adaptations can inform shared solutions. Moreso, the company’s collaborative work with external partner (\*\*\*\*\*) to redesign packaging is not only seen as ‘an added-value innovation’ (11.SL.US) but a mechanism of scalability through co-creation. This is crucial for navigating the complexities of maintaining consistency and responsiveness across regions. Interconnected Community-Building dimension forms the core relational foundation for this scaling capacity, but only in synergy with the other systemic dimensions and processes can it become more than rhetoric.

Statements such as “*we need everyone to have the same mindset to make better decisions*” (01.SL.US) highlight the tension between value alignment and contextual sensitivity. This suggests a pressing need to translate alignment into co-creation, making the dimension of Co-Creating Values crucial. The company’s aspiration becomes more feasible when mindset is shaped through co-constructed meanings that includes diverse perspectives from various regions, rather than predefined and universally imposed. SanFacon and Spears (2008) argue that “*neglecting any system aspect limits overall outcomes*” (p.9), making Developing Systems Awareness indispensable. This dimension, which evolved from the theme *Expanding Awareness*, equips individuals with the ability to see connections, trace ripple effects, and surface hidden tensions, from overlooked regional inequalities to unintended consequences of well-meaning set of rules. Developing Systems Awareness not only

strengthens ethical foresight but enables leadership at all levels to make context-sensitive decisions that are structurally/ systemically aware. For instance, rather than interpreting leadership spatial separation as mere building design, employees noted: “*If we were physically closer to our managers, maybe relationships would be better*” (17.EM.UK).

Systems Awareness reads such spatial design as a representation for hierarchy, surfacing how power, access, and inclusion manifest in everyday structures. The behavioural dimension of Adaptive Serving, which evolved from *Situational Adaptability*, plays a complementary role by empowering leaders to prioritise systemic integrity over compliance. Rather than serving by adjusting leader’s style to organisational expectations, Adaptive Serving seeks to acknowledge and navigate rather than overlook the tension between service intent and systemic demands. It reframes service as catering for systemic needs, challenging norms when necessary, and redesigning the structures that may hinder inclusion. Shared Moral Authority dimension is particularly relevant in scaling efforts. Unlike the original *Partnering Leadership* theme, which often involved top-down coordination, Shared Moral Authority distributes influence across the system. As Greenleaf (1977) noted, true authority derives from trust and service, not hierarchy. By democratising influence, this dimension empowers local stakeholders to critically question assumptions, contribute, and shape global strategies in ways that considers regional norms. Finally, Systemic Support and Development dimension strengthens scalability by embedding equitable support structures that foster consistency without uniformity. This dimension promotes distributed growth opportunities aligned with local needs. Particularly, in regions with different regulatory or cultural needs, this enables SL to evolve into a systemic developmental framework, not a normative model.

Additionally, to mitigate this scalability tension structurally, the enabling Systemic Innovative Collaboration process must be complemented by the other three processes to operationalise the above SSL dimensions. Supporting this cross-collaborative efforts is the

process of Integrative Communication. Unlike top-down information sharing that enforces consistency, this systemic process facilitates the flow of diverse information, enabling multi-directional dialogue, narrative co-construction, and transparent feedback loops across regions. It ensures that “educating employees around the world” (01.SL.US) becomes a two-way process that enables feedback to shape global strategies, not just align local practices. This addresses the challenge of slow or siloed communication in large organisations (19.EM.IR; 12.LL.UK), which can undermine SL's principles of awareness and responsiveness. To support this awareness Adaptive Learning process becomes vital, which transforms all communicated data, tensions, and divergent experiences into feedback-informed iteration. This includes continuously learning from regional variations in the pace of change and from the SSL implementation practices as they are scaled to new contexts and adapting the strategies accordingly. For example, the company’s reuse of 2020 assessments in its 2022 ESG report suggests a vulnerability in its adaptive capacity. In contrast, Adaptive Learning calls for region-specific learning loops, where stakeholders assess, reflect, and revise strategies based on emergent contextual realities, ensuring that scaling efforts do not become rigid or outdated. In turn, Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation provides these robust feedback loops from diverse contexts, informing scalable strategies and ensuring local relevance and effectiveness, and allowing for continuous adjustment based on real-world experimentation. While the company recognises regional differences, implementation appear more oriented towards standardisation, highlighting the need to ensure that regional differences such as sustainability drivers are acknowledged, monitored, and fed back into strategic feedback loop redesign. Instead of top-down infrequent audits, this process enables contextual co-assessment based on these internal feedback and external dynamics, mitigating the risk of scalability being interpreted as standardisation. Thus, enabling the organisation to remain

agile, responsive, and aligned with evolving external realities, by replacing siloed initiatives with ongoing double-learning loops.

Ultimately, this dual SSL evolution approach (dimensions and processes) forms a robust systemic framework capable of addressing not only the scalability tension but also the other critical SL challenging paradoxes: Normative Control, Power Imbalance, and Complexity Navigation. By fostering Interconnected Community-Building, the framework creates a cohesive yet adaptable organisational interdependent systemic network. Co-creating Values and Shared Moral Authority directly tackle normative control and power imbalances by decentralising influence and decision-making. Adaptive Serving and Developing Systems Awareness equip the organisation to navigate complexity by fostering holistic, system-wide responsiveness and service. Systemic Support & Development cultivates the systemic capacities needed for each of the dimensions, together supported by the systemic processes. The four systemic processes provide the dynamic structure for these dimensions to evolve, ensuring continuous adaptation, transparent information flow, collaborative problem-solving, and feedback-informed development.

The evolution from traditional SL dimensions to SSL dimensions, through the processes allows the company to retain SL's moral foundation while equipping it with the necessary analytical tools to navigate complexity, engage diverse contexts, and embed sustainability into systemic structures. Through the interplay of the six evolved behavioural dimensions and four enabling systemic processes, the SSL framework theoretically addresses the Scalability Tension by rejecting standardisation as the pathway to scale. Instead, scale is achieved through systems interdependency, where behaviours, processes, meanings and realities evolve jointly across individual and organisational levels. This integrated approach aims to provide a clear framework for implementation that scholars like Eva et al. (2019) and Van

Dierendonck (2011) found lacking in traditional SL. The Systemic Servant Leadership represents a promising framework not only with the potential of scaling, but also of adapting to complexity, rebalancing power, and driving long-term, context-sensitive change. It does not aim to reproduce the same SL behaviours across all regions, but to enable region-specific enactments of service, leadership, and collaboration that are held together by systems interconnectedness rather than behavioural alignment.

Thus, rather than discarding SL due to its idealism, the SSL model acknowledges these critiques and responds by evolving SL into a systemically-informed framework that is not only scalable but context-sensitive, structurally adaptive, and rooted in long-term sustainability thinking. This aims at theoretically addressing SL's implementation gaps by providing a structure that can sustain SL principles over the long-term, even in challenging environments like international manufacturing, highlighting its viability as a significant contribution to leadership theory and practice, as a self-sustaining ecosystem of service. In so, the proposed SSL framework aims to offer a practical path for organisations to resolve the apparent contradictions between SL's ethical idealism and the demands of large-scale, complex, interconnected and competitive environments.

However, the analysis not only exposed these tensions, but it has also pointed to critical contingencies-based resolutions (see Table 7) and a theoretical reframing of SL. Despite the challenges, the value of SL remains significant (see Eva et al., 2019 review) and so merits better positioning to enhance its viability within global complex settings. These tensions highlighted the need for a systemic change, that enhances understanding of SL dimensions and processes. Particularly so, by leveraging its unique holistic feature, from a systems thinking lens, as critical step to addressing implementation and modern leadership challenges. ST offers a more nuanced approach to implementation, allowing for the mapping of SL's

limitations in specific contexts and the development of appropriate modifications, supporting continuous learning and flexibility (Gibbons, 2020), allowing for the emergence of the SSL framework.

### **6.3. The Emergence of The SSL Framework: *A Dual-Level Pathway for Sustainable Implementation***

The previous tensions, theoretically led to the elaboration of 6 systemically evolved behavioural dimensions (Co-Creating Values, Systemic Support & Development, Sharing Moral Authority, Adaptive Serving, Interconnected Community-Building, and Developing Systems Awareness), which reconceptualise SL not as a fixed idealistic behavioural model but as a dual-level evolutionary paradigm, made actionable through four systemic processes (Integrative Communication, Adaptive Learning, Systemic Collaboration, and Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation).

This theoretical elaboration reveals the emergence of the Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL), a framework theoretically designed to strengthen and extends traditional SL through systems thinking. This emergence reflects the aim of this study to explore how SL, can be implemented sustainably and systemically in complex, international organisations contexts, covering the overarching research question: *What are the key ingredients for the successful and sustained systemic implementation of servant-leadership in an international organisation, and how does it contribute to advancing corporate sustainability?*

The in-depth case study of a servant-led multinational organisation revealed four key tensions impeding the sustainable implementation of SL, namely, its reliance on individual leader characteristics and authority, its vulnerability to normative control, its difficulty navigating complexity, and challenges in scalability. Empirical findings demonstrated that- while SL's

potential to create people-centred cultures and long-term value for stakeholders cannot be undervalued- its successful and sustained application, depends on mitigating the persistent implementation barriers clustered within the four core tensions. This resolution, in turn, hinges on how well the organisation addresses essential ‘Contingent Conditions’ needed to meet complex fast-paced real-business demands, particularly of international manufacturing organisations, as presented in the previous section and summarised in or table 7.

**Table 7- Organisational systemic Transformation Path (contingency-based resolution)**

Leads to Core ← Tension	If Not Met Barrier ←	←Contingency→	If Met → Systemic Outcome	Leads to →Resolves Tension
Normative Control	Shallow Feedback	Multi-directional Communication & Dissent	Contextual Responsiveness	Resolves Normative Control
Normative Control	Compliance Thinking	Distributed Learning & Diversity	Enhanced Scalability	Resolves Scalability Challenge
Complexity Navigation Challenge	Short/Term Fixes	Systemic Literacy & Feedback Loops	Adaptive Resilience	Resolves Complexity Navigation
Power Imbalance	Leadership Over-Reliance	Decentralised Power & Decision-Making	Systems Interdependency	Resolves Power Imbalance
→ Power Imbalance	Selective inclusion	Interconnectedness Building	Systems Interdependency	Resolves Power Imbalance
Scalability Challenge	Standardised application	Contextual Adaptability & Co-Creation	Contextual Responsiveness	Resolves Normative Control

The table shows that SL is not self-implementing, rather its sustainable implementation relies on the organisation systems-readiness to navigate rather than suppress implementation barriers (e.g., readiness for divergent perspectives and critical dissent rather than shallow feedback, decentralised influence rather than over reliance on specific leaders, and contextual adaptation rather than unified mindset application. These barriers would emerge if the

contingent conditions, such as decentralised power, multidirectional communication, contextual adaptability, and systems literacy, are not met at multi-organisational levels, risking SL regressing into normative alignment or hierarchical approaches, as ways to cope with complexities. In so, each of these barriers reinforces the 4 persistent core tensions (normative control, power imbalance, complexity navigation, and scalability challenges) that for a long time limited the implementation of SL at scale and time. When met, however, they theoretically lead to four systemic outcomes: Contextual Responsiveness, Enhanced Scalability, Adaptive Resilience, and Systems Interdependency, each directly addressing one or more of these tensions.

These contingencies must be intentionally acknowledged and embraced by individuals and structurally supported across the organisation (processes and behaviour), for SL sustainable implementation to most likely become achievable in practice. Accordingly, this study proposed repositioning SL from its idealistic conceptually vulnerable framing into a systems-aware, scalable leadership, via the integration of systems thinking- an overlooked SL holistic strength. Such framework moves beyond individual leader qualities and often varying behaviour to embed systemic capabilities, enabling organisations to drive sustainable transformation at multi-levels. This move resulted in the evolution of the traditional SL themes into the six systemic dimensions, supported by the 4 theoretically elaborated systemic processes, collectively contributing to mitigating the identified core implementation tensions. The new systemic SL framework is, thus, built upon a dual-levels transformation, which both levels elements interdependently supporting each other (see diagram 1, sec. 6.4) to embed SL values in ways that are scalable, context-sensitive, and ethically resilient:

### **6.3.1. Evolved Dimension: Embedding SSL at the Individual Level**

The six evolved SSL dimensions, each of which reconstructs traditional SL themes into capabilities that are not only relational but also systemically impactful:

#### **6.3.1.1. Co-Creating Values: *Moving beyond imposed norms to shared ethical understanding.***

Co-creation enables practices that mitigate normative control and encourages stakeholder ownership. Instead of enforcing a uniform mindset that risks homogeneity, this dimension promotes the local adaptation of core values and negotiated meanings of ethics and sustainability through interactions (dialogues, collaborations, feedback...etc), preventing subtle pressures to conform. While maintaining systems integrity is crucial, shared belief must also be flexible enough to regional variations, ensuring that global principles like “doing the right thing” accommodate diverse local meaning without losing coherence.

#### **6.3.1.2. Systemic Support & Development: *Building distributed growth opportunities.***

Through ST, Systemic Support & Development turns coaching and support into a continuous adaptable system-wide developmental process that can strengthen SL’s capacity for distributed growth opportunities that adapts to different contexts and local conditions. It ensures that development is not siloed events but an ongoing equitable process that can account for inconsistencies in individual leader approaches, mitigating the uneven application of SL practices. In this way, it become a scalable developmental system, empowering individuals across regions, roles, and functions to navigate complexity rather than simply adapt to predefined roles. This aims to create a consistent bench of SSL-capable leaders who can operate across complex environments.

### **6.3.1.3. Shared Moral Authority: *democratising influence and decision-making.***

Traditional SL idealises influence often through humility, empathy and persuasion, while systemic servant leadership recognises influence as emergent property of the dynamic (SSL) system itself. In here, influence is redistributed beyond positional power and over-reliance on leaders' evaluative discretion, fostering a multi-directional approach to leadership and countering entrenched power structures. By decentralising power, this dimension empowers individuals at all levels to contribute to strategic direction, irrespective of their location, gender or position. This challenges the traditional hierarchical control that create implementation barriers in manufacturing and other sectors (Gupta et al., 2020), and mitigates gendered leadership expectations (Tilghman-Havens, 2018), as authority is earned based on competence, co-created values and shared outcomes, not title, building trust and legitimacy.

### **6.3.1.4. Adaptive Serving: *Enabling nuanced responsiveness to diverse contexts.***

This supports SL by moving leadership beyond a purely situational adaptability to a broader, systemic responsiveness. Unless “tailoring leadership to the situation” (12.ML.UK) practices are grounded in Systems Awareness, they risk remaining superficial and hard to replicate across different contexts. Leaders adjust service to broader interdependencies and local realities, ensuring that the ethical premise of servanthood is preserved even as its manifestation varies across different global settings. This can help reconcile global adaptability with co-constructed ethical standards, acknowledging the possibility that the understanding of values might differ across contexts. It incorporates ethical foresight, reactivity and proactive adaptation, providing a practical way to navigate the complexities of international, dynamic environments, and ensuring servant-leadership remains viable in fast-changing or high-pressure environments.

### **6.3.1.5. Interconnected Community-Building: *Extending SL's localised unity into a broader relational system.***

Community is redefined beyond team relation into a living, multi-level network of internal and external stakeholders. This dimension fosters cross-boundary collaboration, ethics-based relationships, and distributed responsibility without imposing conformity. It reframes cohesion as interconnectedness, rejecting the push for cultural uniformity, instead grounding community in systemic interdependency, where shared purpose emerges through mutual influence, distributed learning, and context-aware growth. Rather than treating relationships as static or localised, this dimension enables the organisation to act as a responsive system of stakeholders capable of sensing and adapting to change collectively. Thus, supporting sustainable SL by ensuring that community-building remains dynamic, interconnected, and evolving across boundaries.

### **6.3.1.6. Developing Systems Awareness: *Cultivating holistic understanding of interdependencies***

Equips individuals with systems thinking capabilities, crucial for understanding how to scale SSL principles, allowing for context-sensitive adaptation rather than blind replication.

Leaders are expected to ask, “Do we see the bigger picture/ a balanced view?” (09.CEO.US), yet this question would remain rhetorical unless supported by tools and processes that embed systemic insight into decision-making. This dimension enables individuals to map, interpret, and act upon complex interdependencies within and beyond the organisation (e.g., how changing work conditions affect community), to trace the ripple effects of decisions on larger organisational, societal, and environmental systems (e.g., how siloed team decisions impact environmental waste), and to identify root causes, and make ethically and systematically informed decisions in complex settings. Thus, supporting the dual approach to global implementation by providing, the analytical depth that traditional SL is often accused of

lacking, by shifting awareness from personal empathy to systemic literacy to navigate complexity.

### **6.3.2. Systemic Organisational Processes: Embedding SSL Structurally**

These interconnected processes function as critical mechanisms that operationalise the SSL's evolved dimensions, linking individual and organisational levels:

#### **6.3.2.1. Integrative Communication: *Ensuring transparent information flow and systemic awareness.***

Facilitates continuous, transparent, multi-directional flow of context-sensitive information without enforcing uniformity. Connects diverse knowledge into shared meaning systems, promoting consistent understanding and ethical deliberation, not just normative alignment. It enables diverse perspectives to shape decision-making processes, ensuring values, feedback, and experiences travel across the system, bridging fragmentation and coherence without control.

#### **6.3.2.2. Adaptive Learning: *Driving continuous adaptation and innovation.***

Establishes feedback loops to reflect and adjust to support ongoing responsiveness and evolve SL implementation systemically over time. This enables the organisation to continually evolve its leadership practices based on reflection, feedback, and real-time adaptation to emerging challenges and opportunities, especially in response to contextual shifts or changing sustainability demands.

#### **6.3.2.3. Systemic Innovative Collaboration: *Fostering cross-contextual problem-solving and scalable solutions.***

Facilitates coordinated action across contexts and roles, aligning efforts toward shared purpose. Connects global teams and regions to co-create sustainable solutions that are rooted

in local contexts but scalable across the organisation. It creates the connective base for shared growth purpose, community building, and avoiding siloed practices (e.g., SL training that reinforces values without structural follow-through), that weaken SL's relational impact.

#### **6.3.2.4. Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation: *Providing robust feedback loops for continuous improvement.***

Continuously gathers diverse insights and outcomes from across the organisation and its stakeholder groups, turning accountability into a mechanism for collective learning rather than control. Builds evaluative mechanisms that embrace local insight, dissent, and diverse success criteria to create adaptive loops that continuously refine goals and strategies in line with evolving social, environmental and organisational conditions. It enables learning from implementation in different contexts rather than pursuing standardisation strategies or short-term technical fixes, strengthening SSL resilience and continuity as scale.

#### **6.3.3. The systemic outcomes: *Critical Tensions Resolution.***

Through the combined evolution of the traditional SL themes and organisational mechanisms, the SSL framework addresses persistent core tensions that can significantly limit the sustainable implementation of SL: namely, its struggle with normative control, power imbalance, complexity navigation, and global scalability.

This evolution results in four systemic outcomes, Enhanced Scalability, Contextual Responsiveness, Balanced Power Dynamics, and Complexity Navigation, each corresponding to and resolving one of the four core tension (as summarised in Table 7, Sec. 6.3). These outcomes are emergent properties of the systemic interplay between SSL's dimensions and processes, and the enabling systems thinking principles that enhance the organisation's systems-readiness by meeting the 'contingent conditions' at multi-levels, such as feedback loops, decentralised agency, and learning infrastructure. Together, these outcomes shift from

isolated acts of service to a distributed, adaptive, responsive and self-sustaining leadership system across diverse organisational contexts (Diagram. 1).

### **6.3.3.1. Enhanced Scalability**

One of the most persistent limitation of SL is its over-reliance on individual leaders whose influence tend to be associated with empathy, love, emotional support and persuasion, often leading to inconsistent practice across the teams. Such idealised influence and emotional behaviours, non-quantifiable as they are, do not easily scale across departments, regions, or time (Laub, 1999).

The SSL framework counters this limitation by embedding SL values and ST capacities into structural mechanisms and everyday systems through ongoing education, feedback, and community practices. *Systemic Support and Development* and *Interconnected Community-Building* dimension facilitated through *Integrative Communication*, together contribute to *Enhanced Scalability* by cultivating organisational leadership capacity, awareness and cohesive resilience, to navigate complexity, creating an adaptable, dispersed network that supports shared purpose and growth across the system.

These enable servant-leadership to become an evolving, distributed system, enacted not only by formal leaders but across departments, regions, and teams, ensuring that its principles are not confined to isolated initiatives or localised cultural influence (mostly Western). This systemic outcome promotes context-flexible adaptation rather than rigid replication, allowing for local innovation and interpretation of shared principles, crucial for large organisations seeking to scale values-based leadership in ways that are structurally embedded and ethically consistent across global operations.

### **6.3.3.2. Contextual Responsiveness**

Traditional SL frameworks often risk becoming normatively prescriptive, promoting fixed ideals of service, care, or humility without accounting much for how these values are interpreted across different cultural, generational, or situational contexts. This can lead to performative alignment, where employees internalise values that “fit” the expected culture without critically engaging with them (Fleming, 2009).

In contrast, SSL fosters *Contextual Responsiveness* by embedding *Co-Creating Values* dimension through *Adaptive Learning* systemic process, allowing for mutual learning and interpretation of shared values within different cultural and regional contexts, ensuring that ethics are not imposed but developed collaboratively and continuously refined based on feedback. This dynamic exchange ensures *Contextual Responsiveness*, where values remain globally coherent yet are locally adapted, enabling SL principles to be upheld while their applications remain flexible, countering the risk of normative compliance.

Subsequently, by resolving the *Normative Control* tension, SSL prevents SL from becoming a tool of emotional conformity, but a framework for critical engagement, allowing values to be lived authentically and appropriately within different contexts. This responsiveness does not weaken alignment, rather, it strengthens ownership, making servant-leadership more inclusive, adaptable and sustainable.

### **6.3.3.3. Balanced Power Dynamics**

Power imbalance is another critical tension in SL. While SL promotes humility and service, in practice it often retains traditional hierarchies, especially in sectors like manufacturing where top-down control is institutionalised (Gupta et al., 2020). This structural contradiction limits employees’ ability to influence, question, or share responsibility. SSL responds to this

tension by decentralising decision-making and accountability, reducing dependence on positional leadership and empowering individuals, system-wide to contribute meaningfully and ethically.

This *Balanced Power Dynamics* outcome emerges from the equitable redistribution of moral and strategic authority through dimensions such as *Shared Moral Authority*, where power is reframed not as position, but as participation, fostering multi-directional influence. This is operationalised through *Systemic Innovative Collaboration*, through which cross-boundary learning, feedback loops, and co-creation of sustainable solutions are infused into the system, enabling a more just and equitable leadership. These elements counteract the hierarchical and often benevolent/ empathetic tendencies embedded in some SL interpretations, where power remains centralised despite rhetorics of service.

This outcome is critical not only for empowerment but for resilience, as leadership does not falter in the absence of traditional authority figures but is continuously evolving across systems. Importantly, it addresses gendered expectations as well, avoiding the tendency to place the emotional burden of care disproportionately on women (e.g., Tilghman-Havens, 2018). As a result, leadership and ethical decision-making are no longer the designated territory of a few but a process that emerges through dialogue, reflection, and system inclusion, crucial for more just and a resilient organisational culture.

#### **6.3.3.4. Complexity Navigation**

In a dynamic world of increasing volatility and interconnection, organisations can no longer just rely on leadership approaches designed for simpler contexts, such as SL (Eva et al., 2019), while relationally rich, it often lacks the analytical tools to engage with such complexity at a systemic level (Senge, 1990).

SSL introduces *Developing Systems Awareness* as a crucial dimension, supported again by *Adaptive Learning* process, but here the focus is on equipping individuals with analytical tools that enable them to develop capacity to sense, interpret, map and act within complex systems. Along with *Adaptive Serving* dimension paired with *Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation*, which enable individuals and organisations to identify feedback loops, trace root cause and consequences, and adjust strategies in real time. These lead to *Complexity Navigation* outcome, where organisations embrace tensions, and are able to continuously learn and adapt, ensuring that leadership remains ethically grounded and relevant within dynamic global environments. This guards against superficial or rigid application of SL, enabling the organisation to stay agile and systems-aware.

Thus, it systemically, strengthens SL's ability to engage with the uncertainties and systemic interdependencies of contemporary organisations such as those linked to sustainability. This align with Greenleaf's (1987) assertion that servant leaders "*use insights from systems disciplines in their quest to build healthier, wiser, freer, and more effective organisations*" (p.260) pinpoints the practical value of ST to SL. Such systemic approach requires '*being OK with the "mess", seeing the "whole", even in its complexity, and behaving ethically*' (Greenleaf, 1987, p.260). Rather than applying SL in smaller or stable contexts, SSL enables it to function within the messy, interdependent realities of global business, where ST plays a crucial role, while maintaining ethical integrity, core foundation SL, brought together through their focus on the 'whole'. This is particularly crucial in managing the complex, broader challenges of Corporate Sustainability (presented in sec. 6.5).

### **6.3.3.5. Integrative Value of the Four Outcomes**

Each of these systemic outcomes- *Enhanced Scalability, Contextual Responsiveness, Balanced Power Dynamics, and Complexity Navigation*- represents the resolution of a core theoretical and practical tension that has often hindered the implementation of SL. Achieved through the systemic interplay of SSL's dimensions and processes, these outcomes collectively provide the systemic conditions for mitigating the barriers to achieving sustainable SL implementation, giving way to the emergence of the SSL framework.

SSL does not resolve these SL's critiques through rhetorical reinterpretation, but through structural and behavioural transformation, i.e. embedding servant-leadership into the system of the organisation itself. Rather than relying on alignment, benevolence or idealised culture, SSL builds the structural, relational, and learning capacities necessary for SL to function systemically. In doing so, it offers a practical path forward for realising SL's values not as aspirational ideals, but as a viable, scalable, and evolving leadership system, shaped by internal and external stakeholders' interdependent dynamics and interaction.

## **6.4. The key Ingredients' Contribution to Self-Sustained Systemic**

### **Implementation: *Shaping Culture, Capacity and sustainability***

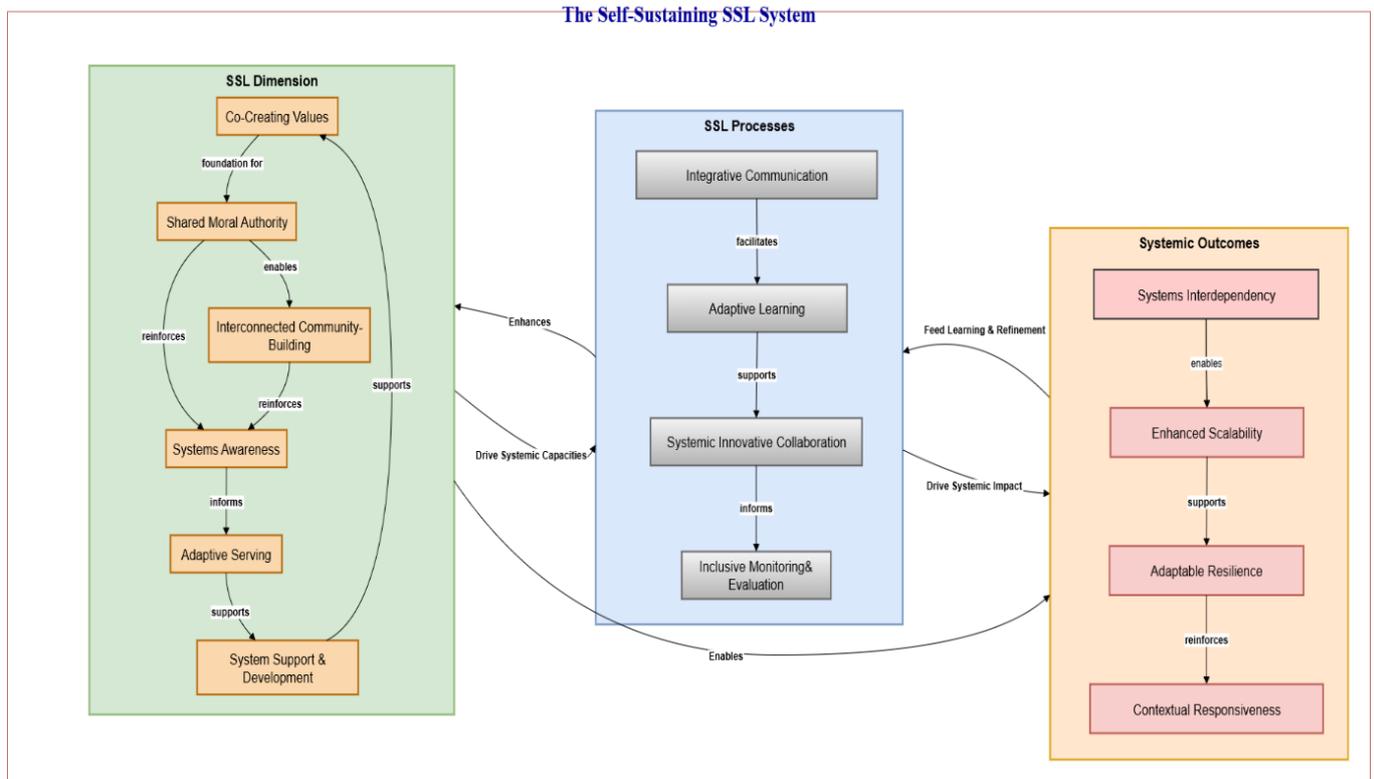
A fully developed systemic servant leadership framework would recognise leadership not as leaders' behaviour or characteristics, but as an emergent property of the system itself, where 'interdependency' is at the core of this SSL system, building continuity through collective action, learning and iterative improvements across roles, teams, and regions. This focus is inspired by Greenleaf (1977) original notion of relations as stemming from a "shared search for wholeness" (p. 50), positioning shared growth, as the foundation of the SSL wider interdependent system that extends across teams, hierarchies, and external partners, where

behaviours, processes, meanings and realities evolve jointly across individual and organisational levels. By embracing multi-contextual systems over rigid standardisation, the SSL framework ensures that the benefits of servant-leadership is infused throughout the entire organisation and beyond, contributing to organisational adaptability and sustainability.

The systemic processes represent the mechanisms through which systemic servant leadership operates. They operationalise the SSL behavioural dimensions across multi-levels of the organisation, by embedding SL values and ST principles in day-to-day co-operations, decisions, feedback systems, and strategic learning. The systemically evolved dimensions, theoretically represent the enactment of SSL. They activate the processes through dynamic live interactions and inter-relational behaviours system-wide, ensuring realities and meanings are constantly evolving, and that leadership is practiced consistently, interdependently, and contextually across the organisation. It is this holistic interplay that makes up the essence of the self-sustained Systemic implementation of Servant-Leadership, that forms the core of SSL (see diagram 1).

In so, positioning SSL not merely an evolved version of SL, but a reframed system for its sustainable implementation: a self-sustaining SSL System.

**Diagram. 1- The SSL Framework (Integrated Ingredients)**



The integration of ST, does not intend to replace SL, rather completes it by, spotlighting its overlooked strengths that are very much needed in today’s era (Eva et al., 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2018; Liden et al., 2008 ). This systemic SL evolution rather aligns with Greenleaf (1977), advice to servant leaders to “*When looking at anything or consider anything, look at it as “a whole” as much as you can before you swing on it*” (c.f. Sipe and Frick, 2009, p. 168). Greenleaf (1977) believed that this is a key to successful leadership, as through this lens, SL leaders can “*understand relationships between people, processes, structures, belief systems and a host of other factors*” (Sipe and Frick, 2009, p.179). Through such systemic perspective, this research reframes SL as a dynamic system of interdependent behaviours and organisational processes.

The six systemically evolved SSL behavioural dimensions cultivate servant-leaders who can engage with uncertainty, complexity, and competing priorities. At the same time, the enabling processes, restructure how information, influence, and accountability flow throughout the organisation. However, the true power of the SSL framework lies in their interdependency, generating four critical systemic outcomes that can help mitigate the persistent core tensions that for a long-time impeded the implementation of SL at scale within large, complex environments; in turn, they create the necessary contingent conditions for a systems-ready organisational environment at multi-levels. As such the SSL becomes an interconnected self-sustaining ecosystem where SL becomes embedded, sustained, and constantly evolving in line with the dynamic, ethical and contextual realities. Table (8), below, presents a clear synthesis of how the interdependency of the integrated elements, the systemic outcome that results from their combined effort in addressing these tensions, and the way that combination contributes to long-term sustainable implementation of SL.

These interdependent elements dynamically and mutually fuel each other to holistically reinforce servant-leadership as a self-sustaining system of values, relationships, and structures that can evolve across contexts without relying on specific individuals' control. For instance, Developing Systems Awareness (a dimension) is actively cultivated and reinforced through Adaptive Learning (a process) that encourages continuous reflection on systemic impacts. Similarly, Shared Moral Authority (a dimension) is operationalised through Systemic Innovative Collaboration (a process) that decentralises decision-making and fosters multi-directional influence. This continuous feedback loop between individual behaviours and organisational processes ensures that SL is not just adopted but deeply integrated and continually reinforced, making it self-sustaining and resilient to external pressures or leadership changes.

**Table 8- The integrated contribution of the SSL ingredients to the long-term systemic SL implementation**

<b>SSL Dimensions &amp; Their Evolution</b>	<b>Organisational Processes &amp; Their Role</b>	<b>Systemic Outcomes Achieved</b>	<b>Contribution to Long-Term Sustainable SL Implementation</b>
<b>Co-Creating Values</b> <i>(from Aligning Values)</i>	<b>Adaptive Learning:</b> Enables continuous refinement and adaptation of values based on feedback.	<b>Contextual Responsiveness:</b> Values are globally coherent yet locally relevant.	Fosters adaptable culture, preventing regression to rigid norms.
<b>Systemic Supporting and Development</b> <i>(from Support and Coaching)</i>	<b>Integrative Communication:</b> Ensures transparent sharing of development insights and needs across units.	<b>Enhanced Scalability:</b> Leadership capacity is built system-wide and adaptably.	Creates a distributed, resilient leadership system capable of navigating complexity.
<b>Shared Moral Authority</b> <i>(from Partnering Leadership)</i>	<b>Systemic Innovative Collaboration:</b> Fosters multi-directional problem-solving and shared decision-making.	<b>Balanced Power Dynamics:</b> Influence is democratised, reducing reliance on central authority.	Embeds ethical decision-making and accountability throughout the organisation, making SL self-sustaining.
<b>Adaptive Serving</b> <i>(from Situational Adaptability)</i>	<b>Inclusive Monitoring &amp; Evaluation:</b> Provides feedback loops for continuous adjustment to diverse needs.	<b>Complexity Navigation:</b> Leaders and systems respond ethically and systematically to dynamic environments.	Ensures SL remains relevant and effective across varied global contexts, preventing superficial application.
<b>Developing Systems Awareness</b> <i>(from Expanding Awareness)</i>	<b>Adaptive Learning:</b> Drives continuous adaptation to complex sustainability challenges.	<b>Complexity Navigation:</b> Cultivates holistic understanding of interdependencies.	Equips leaders to understand and manage systemic impacts, ensuring SL principles are deeply embedded.
<b>Interconnected Community-Building</b> <i>(from Building Community)</i>	<b>Integrative Communication:</b> Strengthens awareness and responsiveness across the entire system.	<b>Enhanced Scalability:</b> Creates a cohesive, adaptable, interdependent-knit organisational fabric.	Builds a robust, distributed network that sustains SL principles and practices across the entire organisation.
<b>All Dimensions &amp; Processes Combined</b>	<b>All Processes &amp; Dimensions Combined</b>	<b>Corporate Sustainability</b>	The SSL provides a comprehensive, integrated, and dynamic framework that transforms SL from an idealistic philosophy into a practical, systems-aware, and scalable leadership approach. It ensures SL principles are deeply embedded, continuously adapted, and widely diffused, leading to sustained organisational effectiveness and resilience in complex global economic, social and environmental contexts.

A strong contribution of this theoretical evolution lies in its ability to preserve what is most valuable in servant-leadership, its ethical foundation and focus on service, while addressing its limitations in complex organisational contexts. Integrating SL's ethical orientation with systems analysis, enhances organisations' ability to address complex sustainability challenges (Greenleaf, 2022). This highlights, the other most valuable aspect of this framework- its practical potential. By reconceptualising leadership as an emergent property of systems rather than an individual attribute, it offers organisations a path to developing leadership capacity at scale. SSL theoretically could enable the organisation to move from a values-driven culture to a systems-aware leadership, that balances ethics and adaptability, local agency and global cohesion, service and structure.

The SSL framework thus, emerges not simply as a leadership theory, but as a promising holistic, practical system for embedding servant-leadership into organisational structures. It enables SL to be continuously adapted, ethically grounded, and operational at scale, ensuring it does not remain idealistic, but becomes a lived, systemic reality. Such SSL framework would approach tensions not as problems to be resolved or suppressed, but as complexity to be embraced and managed through ongoing dialogue, cross-boundary collaboration, contextual adaptation and continuous feedback loops. Such systemic lens, views organisational limitations as strategic opportunities and a source of innovation.

Recognising the significant value of SL, this study does not intend to abandon the servant; but to empower them, with tools, processes, and systemic awareness to serve better, broader, and more sustainably. Through this ST integration, SL could theoretically evolve into a scalable, context-sensitive leadership equipped for the challenges of corporate sustainability at scale.

## **6.5. SSL for CS: Navigating Corporate Sustainability as a Complex Context**

In an era marked by rapid technological shifts and unprecedented complexity, organisations struggle with multifaceted challenge, that include volatile economic markets, complex social dynamics, and pressing environmental concerns. Corporate Sustainability stands as a typical example of such a complex challenge. Accordingly, Ashrafi et al (2018) CS is “a holistic approach to delivering value in social, environmental, and economic spheres in a long-term perspective, supporting greater responsibility and focus on ethical values (p. 679). This highlights that CS is not merely a set of isolated initiatives, but a dynamic, interconnected context demanding an ethical, holistic and adaptive leadership approach.

Moreso, many other scholars like Gibbons (2020) are increasingly highlighting that CS paradigms have evolved to the “*next wave of sustainability*” (p.1), shifting from meeting stakeholders' needs to acknowledging that the organisation is nested in a wider system comprising interconnected systems. Within such a context, traditional models of leadership, often hierarchical, performance-driven, and siloed, have proven insufficient. Peiro et al. (2021) argue that given such complex shift in CS challenges, the traditional approaches are “*of limited use*”, and that more approaches with perspectives that “accept interrelations among elements of systems and the participation of stakeholders in the co-creation of solutions to achieve a better life for all” (p.1), are needed. Similarly, Dreier et al. (2019) stressed that such complex CS challenges call for “holistic, synergistic and people-centred approaches, engaging all stakeholders, to achieve them” (p 8). This flagged the need for a leadership model capable of embracing uncertainty, facilitating cross-boundary collaboration and co-creation, and embedding values across diverse and dynamic systems.

In that vein, Ferdig (2007) asserts that CS challenges require a leadership ultimately grounded in a personal ethic that reaches beyond self-interest (p.1), which views the role of a leader to be a leader ‘with’ others instead of a leader ‘of’ or ‘over’ others and who cannot effectively operate outside of the holistic interconnections that exist among and between people and systems (p.27). This is corroborated by Ayoubi et al (2015) argument that a suitable adaptive leadership style grounded in ethical values is required, which should perform as an “evolutionary or a serving style” to empower followers and motivate them in learning and in using their autonomy (p.5). The Systemic Servant Leadership framework directly responds to these demands, offering a systemic yet adaptive approach that enables organisations to manage the inherent complexity of CS while remaining ethically grounded and operationally agile. As such, supporting Van Dierendonck’s (2011) proposition that servant-leadership behaviours can positively influence organisational-level Corporate Sustainability primarily through cultivating an other-serving orientated culture within the organisational.

However, unlike traditional SL, which has historically been criticised for its dependence on individual morality and its limited scalability (Eva et al., 2019), SSL evolves it into an organisational system by integrating six behavioural dimensions with four systemic processes. This dual-level design equips organisations with both the ethical intent and the systemic tools to embed sustainability into everyday practice. It does so by fostering relational depth (through co-creation, shared authority, and systemic awareness) while building systemic capacity (through adaptive learning, inclusive monitoring & Evaluation, and integrative communication). As such, SSL does not merely support CS from the outside, it internally align with the purpose of sustainability itself. The contribution of SSL to CS can best be understood by examining how it enables organisations to operate effectively within complexity, rather than attempting to avoid it.

First, SSL promotes long-term thinking and adaptive strategy, two capabilities essential to sustainability leadership (Lozano, 2018). Through dimensions like *Systemic Support and Development* and *Developing Systems Awareness*, SSL builds the organisational capacity to balance standardisation with contextual responsiveness, by not only acknowledging that CS drivers and interpretations differ across regions (ESG, 2022) but embracing it as a source of innovation. It ensures that individuals at all levels are encouraged to perceive interconnections and map the complex interdependencies that define sustainability challenges. This moves beyond just an understanding of environmental or socio-economic issues to a perception of their root causes and ripple effects across the system. For instance, understanding how isolated decisions in product design might impact consumer perception and tracing the root cause to single-use packaging, which may impact the environment.

This heightened awareness and systemic literacy directly informs more holistic decision-making for CS that balances immediate needs with future consequences and enabling the ongoing identification of sustainability risks and opportunities. This contrasts with the short-term view often reinforced by traditional performance metrics and revenue pressures, enabling sustainability to be approached only if it adds or innovative value (11.SL.US), revealing a misalignment with company's values. This may be reinforcing CS fragmented understanding among employees or sending them mixed messages about what is truly valued.

*Adaptive Serving* dimension enables leaders to respond to these complex CS insights with flexible, context-sensitive actions. In a complex and rapidly changing CS demands, static sustainability plans are often prone to failure (Williams et al., 2017), where the ability to adapt service to unique stakeholders' needs become critical. Adaptability is crucial for implementing CS initiatives that are both globally coherent and locally relevant, ensuring that the essence of sustainable service is preserved even as its manifestation changes. The SSL

framework offers a scalable, and context-sensitive approach to embedding sustainability in a global organisational operation, aligning individuals, teams, and strategies around shared CS objectives in ways that are responsive, inclusive, and adaptable.

Furthermore, *Interconnected Community-Building* dimension creates a strong, adaptive network of relationships that prevents traditional silos that contradict CS holistic nature. Sustainability initiatives often struggle because environmental, social, and governance concerns are owned by designated teams or small initiatives are fragmented across departments (Galpin and Whittington, 2012), such is the case with Company X, where the ESG team and designated R&D people are the directly involved bodies (20.LL.UK), or where reducing plastic initiatives are scattered across teams (14.EM.UK). In complex CS systems, clear information flow and cross collaboration are critical for addressing the underlying multifaceted tensions like gender equality, recyclable products or production costs. A fragmented organisation would struggle to share knowledge, coordinate efforts, and respond collectively to sustainability demands.

SSL responds to this fragmentation by embedding leadership capabilities across the interconnected community of networks, while *Systemic Inclusive Collaboration* process enables these networks to work together toward shared purposes without enforcing conformity, or excluding others that are not directly involved in CS (20.LL.UK). By fostering genuine interconnectedness, SSL ensures that diverse perspectives (e.g., from different regions, departments, or external stakeholders) are integrated, ideas are transparently shared, and cross- boundary collaborative solutions are encouraged, essential elements for tackling complex, multi-stakeholder CS challenges and underlying tensions. This distributed approach allows sustainability initiatives to take roots adaptively in different contexts while maintaining coherence at the systems level.

This is perhaps the most critical contributions of SSL- its capacity to distribute moral and decision-making authority, crucial for tackling sustainability issues that require shared responsibility (Epstein and Buhovac, 2014). *Shared Moral Authority* dimension plays a crucial role here, in advancing CS, by ensuring that decisions are not solely driven by short-term financial gains but also by ethical considerations and long-term sustainable impacts. Through this dimension, ethical leadership is no longer a centralised responsibility of the senior leadership but it is cultivated throughout the interconnected SSL system, a vital strategy for holistically managing the three complex domains of CS. Shared Moral Authority empowers individuals across all levels and functions to contribute towards strategic direction and problem-solving related to sustainability, minimising delayed responses to emerging issues, and a lack of local insight into environmental or social impacts. By democratising influence, SSL enables faster, more informed, and contextually relevant responses to CS challenges.

This also mitigates the risk of single points of failure in the system<sup>4</sup> (Ryait et al., 2020) and fosters a more resilient organisational structure (Settembre-Blundo, 2021) capable of distributing CS load across operations, ensuring no single part of the system (e.g., ESG team) becomes overwhelmed. It also encourages a more balanced approach to decision-making, where environmental and social considerations are given equal attention as economic ones. This leads to more holistic and responsible outcomes that benefit all stakeholders, moving beyond a narrow shareholder-centric view to striving to balance and sustain the system and its parts (Bansal, 2013).

*Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation* process is also crucial, providing ongoing feedback on CS performance. It moves beyond traditional, often siloed, metrics to capture systemic

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<sup>4</sup> A Single Point of Failure (SPOF) is a weak part in the system whose failure can bring down the entire system (Ryait et al., 2020).

complexities and diverse insights related to sustainability, ensuring that evaluation is a tool for continuous improvement and contextual responsiveness rather than mere compliance. This process allows the organisation to track the true impact of its actions on complex CS systems and make necessary adjustments, fostering genuine transparency. It also enables organisations to surface marginalised perspectives, engage dissent constructively, and integrate diverse insights into sustainability decision-making.

Supported by *Adaptive Learning* process, it establishes continuous double learning loops that allow the organisation to learn from its CS actions, adapt its sustainability strategies, and refine its approaches in real-time. Adaptive Learning ensures that the organisation remains agile, capable of evolving its responses to emergent environmental, social, and Economic challenges and opportunities. Sustainability principles such as human rights, environmental stewardship, or diversity must be upheld system-wide, their operationalisation often requires local adaptation. SSL ensures that CS is not treated as an isolated initiative or a mere compliance method but is deeply integrated into the organisation's core values, strategies, and operations.

Dimension of *Co-Creating Values* allows for the negotiation of ethical and sustainable practices that resonate locally while maintaining global coherence. This ensures that CS principles become part of the organisational identity DNA, rather than mere isolated philanthropic efforts, fostering a culture where sustainability is everyone's shared passion (Epstein and Buhovac, 2014). These are supported by processes like *Integrative Communication*, which allow best practices, challenges, and insights to flow multi-directionally across the organisation. As such, avoiding top-down unified sustainability lens (ESG, 2022) and the fragmentation of purely local approaches.

Finally, in a context where sustainability claims are increasingly scrutinised by external stakeholders and where consumer expectations evolve rapidly, the ability to respond with authenticity is vital for the organisation sustainability and reputation (Waldman, 2014). SSL fosters this resilience by anchoring sustainability in relational trust, shared responsibility, and continuous feedback. It ensures that sustainability is not only declared but lived as an embedded and evolving reality. In this way, SSL enhances both the credibility and capacity of the organisation to lead in the sustainability domain.

In sum, the Systemic Servant Leadership framework is uniquely positioned to address the inherent complexities of modern organisational environments, using Corporate Sustainability as an important context to highlight its distinctive value. Through its systemically evolved dimensions and processes, SSL equips organisations with the analytical and ethical capabilities needed to navigate complex CS challenges, embrace tensions, adapt ethically, and act systemically. In so, it offers a leadership approach that is deeply aligned with the demands of sustainable transformation, ensuring that sustainability values are a lived reality embedded in the organisation's culture, behaviours, processes, and outcomes. It shifts sustainability from an external pressure into an internal capability, and from a compliance risk into a relational and an integrated, strategic asset. This holistic and dynamic approach makes SSL a promising framework for organisations committed to long-term success, highlighting its viability as a systemic leadership fit for sustainable futures.

## **6.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has critically examined the evolution of servant-leadership into a more systemic, scalable, and sustainable approach through the development of the Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) framework. Drawing from in-depth empirical findings with an international manufacturing company, and the integration of systems thinking principles, the discussion

chapter addressed the persistent limitations and implementation challenges of SL, namely, its vulnerability to normative control, power imbalance, complexity navigation inadequacy and scalability limitations.

Through the emergence of six evolved behavioural dimensions and four systemic organisational processes, SSL presents a dual-level transformation of SL. The behavioural dimensions, such as *Shared Moral Authority*, *Systems Awareness*, and *Interconnected Community-Building*, extend SL from a set of personal leaders' values to distributed capacities embedded across interconnectedness and interdependent roles. Simultaneously, the organisational processes, *Adaptive Learning*, *Integrative Communication*, *Systemic Collaboration*, and *Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation*, operationalise and systemically structure the ongoing development, coordination, and contextual sensitivity of these values within complex, evolving systems. Together, these interdependent elements enable the SSL framework to function not merely as a set of values, but as a self-sustaining leadership system.

This systemic integration allows leadership to adapt across diverse global settings, balance ethical coherence with local variation, and shift from centralised and varied leadership behaviours to collaborative, multi-level influence structures. Moreover, the SSL framework delivers four core systemic outcomes, *Enhanced Scalability*, *Contextual Responsiveness*, *Balanced Power Dynamics*, and *Complexity Navigation*, each directly resolving the core tensions that hindered traditional SL's sustainable implementation. These outcomes are not merely benefits of the SSL, but critical theoretical indicators of the framework's long-term viability in complex business contexts. SSL is shown to significantly contribute to corporate sustainability, not as a philanthropic effort but as a core systemic function.

By transforming leadership into a dynamic interdependent system that enables learning, ethical adaptation, distributed authority, and cross-system interdependency, SSL positions itself as a viable leadership that responds to the need for an ethical, systemic approach to holistically manage CS complexities. It moves sustainability from being a compliance or innovative siloed practice into a relational, behavioural, and structural system embedded in core operations, reflected in how organisations serve, evolve and build interconnected system of communities.

Overall, this discussion chapter has argued that the sustainable implementation of SL, when evolved systemically, requires more than values or SL training. It holistically requires systemic structure for interdependence, capacity for context responsiveness, acceptance of tensions and a commitment to adaptive, distributed leadership. SSL offers a theoretically elaborated and empirically grounded framework for such promising transformation, providing a promising practical framework for international organisations seeking to ethically navigate the complexities of modern business world.

## **Chapter 7- Thesis Conclusion**

### **7. Introduction**

This study conceptualised the Systemic Servant Leadership framework as an evolved form of SL, one that retains its ethical foundation but strengthened through systemic insight and structure for navigating complexity, supporting contextual responsiveness, and enabling sustained, scalable impact. Developed through in-depth qualitative research within an exemplary international organisation, SSL offers not simply an enhancement of SL but a

reframing of it- as a dual-level leadership system in which behaviours and processes are interdependently enacted and co-evolve over time.

## **7.1. Relating to The Research Questions**

The research began with the central aim of examining how servant-leadership, known for its ethical and relational foundation, could be meaningfully developed and sustained within the complex, dynamic context of a multinational organisational system. In so doing, it sought to answer the overarching research question guiding this research: *What are the key ingredients for the successful and sustained systemic implementation of servant-leadership in an international organisation, and how does it contribute to advancing corporate sustainability?*

This was explored through three sub-questions, each assisting to fulfil a different layer of the research objectives, namely, the empirical identification of behavioural patterns, the elaboration of systemic mechanisms through systems thinking, and the broader organisational implications for sustainability.

The empirical phase of the research answered the first sub-question by identifying six key behavioural themes that characterise the long-term enactment of SL in the organisation studied. These themes, such as aligning values, providing coaching support, partnering leadership and fostering community, reflected the ways in which SL was lived and practiced across regional and functional boundaries according to participants narratives. Yet these accounts of SL, while strongly values-driven, were often found to be unevenly distributed and constrained by structural limitations, including normative expectations, top-down communication flows, and regional disparities in support and interpretation. These findings echoed critiques in the literature that SL, although relationally powerful, lacks the operational structure to ensure consistent and sustainable implementation, particularly in complex and distributed organisations.

It became evident that behavioural consistency alone could not sustain SL at scale. Instead, what was required was a theoretical shift, from a focus on individual leader behaviours toward a systems-based perspective capable of clarifying and enabling the underlying mechanisms through which those behaviours are supported and operationalised. The traditional SL mechanisms, such as communication, education, and performance reviews, were often experienced as inconsistent, lacking structural coordination and systemic depth (e.g., 20.LL.UK; 27.EM.LX; 26.ML.UK). Rather than fostering clarity and inclusion, these mechanisms were frequently constrained by rigid normative expectations, hierarchical controls, and fragmented implementation across regions. Some participants described these inconsistencies as engendering a sense of apprehension, vagueness, obedience, and even job insecurity, particularly where decisions were made without transparency (behind the scenes/ without you sometimes/ does not communicate everything/ in time/ going around the circles) or regional disparities (such as in communication, education and CS efforts) (e.g., 03.LL.UK; 16.EM.NL; 17.EM.UK; 41.EM.FR; 12.LL.UK).

These findings highlighted the need to move beyond fragmented or normative enactments of SL and towards an integrated, systems-based approach that could embed leadership values in organisational processes capable of adapting to complexity and context. As, viewed through a systems thinking lens, leadership is no longer understood as a set of isolated behaviours enacted by individuals, but as an emergent property of interactions among multiple actors, structures, and feedback loops within and across organisational levels. Within this framework, it became even more apparent that without an adapted theoretical shift in individual behaviour and mindset to build the necessary systemic capabilities to activate and reinforce the systemic processes, SL risks becoming normative, inconsistent, or performative. This theoretical shifts responded directly to the second sub-question, which asked how

systems thinking might help clarify the key elements and processes required for the long-term implementation of servant-leadership.

The result of this dual-level theoretical evolution was the development of the Systemic Servant Leadership - a framework that reconceptualises SL as an organisational capability rather than an individual virtue. At the individual level, the original behavioural themes were reframed into six theoretically evolved SSL dimensions, each reflecting a shift from relational practice toward system-wide impact: Co-Creating Values, Systemic Support & Development, Sharing Moral Authority, Adaptive Serving, Interconnected Community-Building, and Developing Systems Awareness. These dimensions are embedded and reinforced through four interdependent systemic processes: Integrative Communication, Adaptive Learning, Systemic Innovative Collaboration, and Inclusive Monitoring & Evaluation. It is through the interplay of these dimensions and processes that the values of servant-leadership are translated into sustainable, scalable, and context-sensitive organisational practice. Together, they reconceptualise SL not as a fixed idealistic behavioural model but as a self-sustaining leadership system (Diagram 1). Theoretically, the SSL framework ensures that servant-leadership is not reduced to personality traits or normative conformity, but functions as an adaptive leadership system capable of responding to shifting global and local demands.

Critically, the empirical findings, also revealed the necessity of certain enabling conditions or contingencies. Decentralised decision-making, multi-directional communication, contextual adaptability, and systemic feedback literacy emerged as essential supports for SSL to take root and flourish. Where these conditions were absent, participants reported feelings of disconnection, apprehension, and misalignment, pointing to the systemic barriers that can undermine SL if not addressed. Conversely, from a theoretical lens, when these conditions are met, the dual-level interplay between behaviours and processes generated four powerful

systemic outcomes: Enhanced Scalability, Balanced Power Dynamics, Contextual Responsiveness, and Effective Complexity Navigation. These outcomes aim at directly addressing the persistent tensions that have limited SL's application in global, complex environments and stress the importance of structural transformation alongside ethical commitment. These contingencies must be intentionally acknowledged and structurally supported across the organisation (processes and behaviour), for SL sustainable implementation to most likely become achievable. Systems thinking offers promising conceptual and practical tools to support this, by enhancing the organisation systems-readiness to navigate rather than suppress tensions, enabling servant-leadership to evolve into a systemic capability that aligns ethical intent with structural enablement.

This systemic SL development not only answered the first two sub-questions but also began to address the overarching research question. *The key ingredients for the successful and sustained long-term implementation of servant-leadership*, lie not in defining specific behaviours or values, but in rethinking leadership as an interdependent, adaptive system, where behavioural transformation is structurally enabled, contextually responsive, and purposefully aligned with the organisation's long-term sustainability goals. Thus, contributing towards the final sub-question, concerning the extent to which a systematic implementation of SL can facilitate organisational-level corporate sustainability, was addressed through the holistic development and analysis of the SSL framework.

Such a systematic SL implementation, as theorised through the SSL framework, offers a comprehensive and context-responsive approach with the potential to advancing organisational-level corporate sustainability CS. While traditional SL provides a strong ethical and relational foundation, this study highlights its limitations in complex, global environments, where implementation often falters due to a lack of structural depth and

systemic coherence. SSL addresses this gap by integrating the moral foundations of SL with the structural and analytical capabilities of systems thinking. In doing so, it offers a leadership framework that is both ethically grounded and complexity responsive.

This integration is critical for embedding sustainability, which the study suggests cannot be achieved through isolated behaviours or individual leadership styles alone. Rather, sustainability must be cultivated through interconnected systems of behaviour, process, and feedback. SSL supports this by distributing ethical responsibility, fostering systems awareness, and ensuring that short-term actions remain aligned with long-term organisational purpose. It aims at shifting the burden from individual, often philanthropic, leaders to collective systems of influence and accountability. In this way, SSL transforms servant-leadership from a normative ideal into an organisational capability for ethical and sustainable transformation.

Importantly, this development lends support to Van Dierendonck's (2011) proposition that servant-leadership has the potential to contribute meaningfully to corporate sustainability. It also responds to longstanding calls in the literature for CS leadership models that are both morally-driven (Ferdig, 2007) and systemically grounded (Lozano, 2018; Checkland, 2012). Furthermore, the SSL framework addresses notable gaps in empirical research, particularly the under-exploration of the mechanisms through which leadership behaviours catalyse systemic change (Kantabutra and Ketprapakorn, 2020; Hahn and Hahn, 2014; Millar et al., 2012). Through its dual-level evolution (behaviour and processes), SSL supports the co-creation of sustainability values at all levels of the organisation. These dimensions and processes work interdependently to embed CS practices, that are resonant with SL, into the structural fabric of the organisation, enabling consistent, adaptive, and context-sensitive leadership practice. By offering a framework that bridges individual ethics with

organisational systems, SSL provides a theoretically evolved and practically informed leadership for navigating the complex demands of corporate sustainability.

## **7. 2. Key Contributions of The SSL Framework**

The major contribution of this study to advancing leadership theory is the development of the Systemic Servant Leadership (SSL) framework - a theoretically evolved and empirically informed framework that addresses the long-standing limitations of traditional Servant-leadership through the strategic integration of systems thinking. Through the SSL development, this research makes several significant theoretical, methodological and practical contributions.

### **7.2.1. Theoretical Contribution**

*At a theoretical level*, the study challenges the individualistic and normative assumptions underlying much of the servant-leadership literature. By reframing SL as a dynamic, interdependent system, it advances leadership theory toward more process-centred and systemically embedded conceptions. Traditional SL has been criticised for its idealism, moral over-reliance, and perceived lack of structural operational framework (Eva et al., 2019). SSL addresses these critiques by embedding SL values within adaptive, interdependent systemic processes, with the potential of making them resilient and constantly evolving in complex systems. The SSL framework repositions leadership as an emergent property of relationships, processes, and structural interactions, allowing SL to move beyond dyadic leader-follower models to account for the complexity of global organisations and the need for distributed agency.

The integration of systems thinking into SL represents a significant conceptual development, resulting in an inter-disciplinary leadership model that balances ethical depth with structural

and analytical rigour. This integration reframes SL not only as a moral approach but as a system of interconnected communities, interrelated processes and feedback loops capable of navigating organisational complexity. Moreso, it helps to clarify and identify based on the tensions evident in the empirical data, the key contingent conditions that either enable or constrain the long-term implementation of SL at scale. Through this integration, SSL aims at addressing these empirically found core tensions around power imbalance, normative control, complexity navigation, and scalability; some of which address longstanding critiques, like gender gap, compromising performance, being soft or not suitable for larger contexts.

Importantly, the empirical behavioural themes that emerged from participants' accounts were not discarded but developed through theoretical SL/ST synthesis into six SSL dimensions. These dimensions- Co-Creating Values, Systemic Support & Development, Shared Moral Authority, Adaptive Serving, Interconnected Community-Building, and Developing Systems Awareness- are not abstract ideals but informed responses to real organisational tensions, emerging from participants accounts. They represent a theoretical move from relational ethics to system-wide, distributed moral capabilities. In so, responding to the increasing calls for new ethical, systems-integrated sustainability leadership paradigm (e.g., Lozano, 2018; Hahn and Hahn, 2014; Ferdig, 2007).

This dual-level elaboration, of behavioural dimensions and systemic processes, offers a promising transferable framework for understanding how ethical leadership can be enacted systemically. It clarifies how values like service, humility, and care can move beyond symbolic alignment to become the operational drivers of sustainability-focused, adaptive leadership systems. In so, SSL contributes to the new wave of leadership theory that increasingly demand the acknowledgement of the multi-level, interdependent nature of modern organisations (Kantabutra and Ketprapakorn, 2020). As Peiro et al. (2021) assert that we are approaching a new global order in which *“the way we approach this period can lead*

*to or hinder the achievement of a sustainable world”* (p.1). It positions interdependency, not direction, as the central leadership function, evaluated by how effectively it aligns behaviours, systems, and values toward sustainable outcomes. This marks a significant evolution in how leadership is understood and developed.

In leadership Education and training resource, particularly for business schools and leadership development programmes, SSL offers a promising platform for introducing students and practitioners to the realities of leading in complex, interdependent environments, aimed at developing future servant-leaders and value-driven followers. It challenges educators and trainers to move beyond teaching leadership as a set of personal competencies and toward cultivating the interplay between ethical behaviours and enabling systemic processes. By internalising SSL’s six behavioural dimensions and four systemic processes, learners can develop pro-CS mindsets and capabilities attuned to the systemic demands of modern organisations, if further tested and developed.

### **7.2.2. Practical Contribution**

At a *practical level*, the SSL framework has the potential to provide organisations with a clear pathway for embedding leadership development, sustainability, and systemic change into core processes.

The SSL framework strength lies in aligning SL’s ethical foundation with systemic processes that support consistent implementation across diverse settings. Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model, SSL suggests values to be expressed contextually through systemic structures that retain their moral integrity while accommodating regional and operational diversity. SSL’s adaptability does not dilute servant-leadership’s ethical core; rather, it supports context-sensitive implementation by embedding values within systemically coherent, yet flexible, structures. This balance offers organisations the opportunity to retain

ethical coherence while adjusting implementation to local realities, thus, helping to address one of the most enduring limitations of SL in global practice.

This adaptability is crucial for embedding sustainability not through isolated programmes or the influence of individual leaders, but through integrated systems of behaviour, feedback, and shared accountability. As articulated by one senior leader, “To bring to life a culture that supports sustainable business practices, it has got to be something that we do every day” (09.CEO.US). SSL operationalises this everyday sustainability by embedding relational values into organisational mechanisms that support long-term responsiveness, learning, and decentralised decision-making.

Moreso, while its development is empirically informed through a single case study (albeit exemplary) SSL’s interdependent components- behavioural dimensions, systemic processes, and intended outcomes (when contingencies are met)- could be adapted to other contexts, sectors, and regions, provided adequate or customised adaptation and training strategies are in place, which could serve as grounds for future research (Sec.7.3). It can guide leaders understand how values can be operationalised through organisational structures that support inclusion, shared accountability, decentralised influence, and responsiveness to stakeholder needs; without reducing it to rigid compliance or standardisation.

This positions SSL not only as a case-specific model but as a potentially replicable, practical tool that can inform leadership development, organisational change, and sustainability strategy across a wide range of settings, and which organisations can tailor and scale to their needs, while maintaining alignment with their core values and strategic priorities. Its dual emphasis on ethical depth and structural competence makes it particularly highly applicable to large, global organisations, where servant-leadership has historically struggled to scale.

Beyond implementation, SSL can also function as a tool for organisational learning and development. Its systemic processes provide the structure for integrating leadership development into performance management, recruitment, governance, and organisational learning, to help ensure that values are not only espoused but enacted. Rather than relying on personality-driven leadership development, SSL supports the cultivation of collective capabilities through training, system design, and continuous learning. In decentralised, remote or hybrid work environments, SSL's focus on integrative communication and shared moral authority offers pathways that can support sustain cohesion and inclusion without over-relying on hierarchical control. It provides a framework for assessing practices, identifying gaps, and designing interventions that foster inclusive leadership, systemic feedback, and continuous improvement. Moreover, SSL can provide organisations with tools to diagnose gaps, redesign leadership development initiatives, and embed servant-oriented values into recruitment and performance management, that can be customised to different organisational needs.

Ultimately, SSL's contribution to theory and practice lies in its capacity to redefine leadership as an emergent, systemically enabled property. It supports a shift from viewing leadership as the act of exceptional individuals to seeing it as the outcome of well-designed processes, shared authority, and interconnected learning. In this light, SSL offers not only a framework for organisational transformation, but also a guiding tool with the potential for equipping future leaders to think relationally, act ethically, and lead adaptively within the complexities of modern global environment.

### **7.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

As with all research, this study is not without limitations. It is based on an in-depth case study of a single, exemplary international organisation, which while offering a methodological

contribution in filling a gap in qualitative SL research that enables depth and contextual richness (Eva et al., 2019), it is also constrained by statistical generalisability (Tracy, 2013). Although this research follows Yin's (2018) model of analytical generalisation, seeking to develop theoretical propositions rather than predict population outcomes, the specific organisational culture, leadership maturity, and sector, may affect broader applicability.

Thus, while the SSL framework is theoretically developed to support analytical transferability, future research should test its relevance and adaptability across diverse sectors, scales, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies, comparative case analyses, and mixed-method designs could all serve to refine its components and assess its impact over time. Additionally, with all qualitative research, this study carries a risk of researcher bias, particularly in the interpretation of participants' narratives. While triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflective supervision were used to enhance credibility and confirmability, the researcher's interpretive lens remains embedded in the research process. Future studies could adopt participatory or ethnographic designs to further centre participant agency and contextual nuance or use longitudinal and collaborative inquiry methods to capture how SSL principles evolve over time and resist or accommodate shifting organisational dynamics.

Cultural context also remains an area for further exploration. While this study included multinational perspectives, its empirical base was primarily situated within Western contexts. Understanding how SSL manifests or adapts in non-Western settings, where values and power dynamics may differ, would enhance its cross-cultural robustness. Exploring implementation in Africa, Asia, and Latin America would illuminate how systemic SL is expressed, enabled, or constrained by cultural norms and regional stakeholder expectations, thus expanding SL's cross-contextual validity (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Further research, for instance, could examine the tensions that arise when SSL is applied in cultures with higher power distance, and what other contingencies may be further required to address such strong

entrenched power imbalances. Furthermore, while employees in this study frequently described their leaders as “compassionate, kind, humble,” this often reflected their perceptions of individual character rather than leadership commitment to equity. Future research could thus, also explore the dynamics of resistance to shared moral authority and distributed power, which could deepen understanding of SSL’s emancipatory potential and its limits.

Moreover, this study explored the SSL viability in complex settings within corporate sustainability context. However, future research might explore the potential for SSL to inform other areas of leadership inquiry, such as in contexts of complex, dynamic work conditions, particularly relevant as hybrid and distributed workforces become more common since Covid. SSL’s emphasis on structural cohesion and distributed accountability warrants deeper investigation into how community, equality, and adaptability can be sustained in virtual or decentralised environments. This need was echoed in participants’ concerns about the impact of hybrid work on internal community fragmentation (20.LL.UK). This reflection reveal that relational cohesion must be actively supported, rather than assumed, stressing the relevance of such future venue.

Additionally, while this thesis proposes a promising theoretical framework, further work is needed to translate its elements into measurable indicators and tools for organisational development, evaluation, and recruitment criteria. Future research might explore how SSL dimensions and processes can be incorporated into metrics and diagnostic frameworks that can inform practice and strategy in real time; or to refine assessment tools and indicators that can evaluate SSL maturity, progress, and outcomes over time. For instance, quantitative validation, particularly through longitudinal and action research designs, could test the causal pathways between SSL elements and sustainability performance metrics across diverse contexts.

Finally, while SSL was proposed as a foundational framework for advancing leadership development, however, it acknowledges the limitations of a universal application due to different businesses requirements, size, sector and regions. Since the framework is theoretically elaborated, albeit empirically informed, more development is required in this area to empirically test and refine it. However, to ensure effective training and transferability, future programmes developments should focus on cultivating a foundational understanding of SL and systems thinking, as an essential leadership competency. This means going beyond SL training that aims to foster alignment to cultivating both ethical-relational capabilities, and beyond superficial use of “systems” to develop real analytical tools and systems literacy.

In all, by addressing these limitations, future research can continue the development of SSL as a viable, transformative leadership, deepening its conceptual robustness, expanding its practical applicability, and strengthening its contribution to sustainability and organisational systems change.

#### **7.4. Final Reflection: *SSL as a Framework for Leadership in a Complex, Sustainable Future***

SSL reflects a paradigm shift in how leadership is conceptualised and operationalised. It proposes a leadership paradigm that preserves the human-centred premise of SL while offering a way for organisations to act holistically, distribute authority, learn continuously, and engage diverse stakeholders.

SSL suggests that values such as service and community can thrive not despite complexity, but through it, when supported by the right processes, structures, and systemic understanding. does not replace SL’s ethical or relational core, rather it highlights it and scales it through creating interdependent systems that align intention with infrastructure. It positions

leadership not as the remit of a single individual, but as an emerging property of interdependent systems, behaviours, and processes. In doing so, SSL responds to urgent calls for leadership models that bridge moral commitment with operational capability.

This research thus concludes that the long-term, systemic implementation of servant-leadership depends not only on shared values or leadership behaviours, but on how those values are embedded, reinforced, and adapted through systems-aware processes. In this light, SSL is not merely an evolution of SL, it represents a critical theoretical development: a relationally ethical, analytical, and structurally embedded approach to leading sustainability at scale. Similarly, SSL is not simply a theoretical contribution but a promising practical framework for systemic change. It offers a way forward for organisations seeking to embed sustainability through other-serving and adaptive leadership transformation.

However, the proposed framework is not a completed model, but a dynamic theoretical proposition, that must continue to evolve in dialogue with practice, culture, and context. In this way, SSL represents both a culmination of this research and an invitation for future exploration into what it means to lead, serve, adapt and sustain within complex systems.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: *Fortune's Best Companies to Work for With Servant-Leadership.*

Source: *Greenleaf Centre for Servant-Leadership UK, 2022.*

Company Name	City	State / Region	Website
7-Eleven	Dallas	TX	<a href="http://7-eleven.com">7-eleven.com</a>
501c Solutions	Baltimore	MD	<a href="http://amazingnonprofits.com">amazingnonprofits.com</a>
Accretive Solutions	Troy	MI	<a href="http://accretivesolutions.com">accretivesolutions.com</a>
ACT, Advocates for Community Transformation	Dallas	TX	<a href="http://actdallas.org">actdallas.org</a>
AFLAC	Columbus	GA	<a href="http://aflac.com">aflac.com</a>
Agape Flights	Venice	FL	<a href="http://agapeflights.com">agapeflights.com</a>
Alpha Kappa Psi	Indianapolis	IN	<a href="http://AKPsi.org">AKPsi.org</a>
Altarum Institute	Ann Arbor	MI	<a href="http://altarum.org">altarum.org</a>
American Medical Response	Greenwood Village	CO	<a href="http://amr.net">amr.net</a>
Arrow Stage Lines	Norfolk	NE	<a href="http://arrowstagelines.com">arrowstagelines.com</a>
Astonish Results	Warwick	RI	<a href="http://astonishresults.com">astonishresults.com</a>
ATI Career Training Center	North Richland Hills	TX	<a href="http://aticareertraining.edu">aticareertraining.edu</a>
Atwood Associates, LLC	Madison	WI	<a href="http://atwoodrecruiting.com">atwoodrecruiting.com</a>
Azusa Pacific University	Azusa	CA	<a href="http://apu.edu">apu.edu</a>
Balfour Beatty Construction	Dallas	TX	<a href="http://balfourbeattyus.com">balfourbeattyus.com</a>
Banner Baywood Medical Center	Mesa	AZ	<a href="http://bannerhealth.com">bannerhealth.com</a>

Company Name	City	State / Region	Website
Bradley Group	Nashville	TN	<a href="http://thebradleygrp.com">thebradleygrp.com</a>
Broetje Orchards	Prescott	WA	<a href="http://broetjeorchards.com">broetjeorchards.com</a>
C3 Consulting	Nashville	TN	<a href="http://c3-consult.com">c3-consult.com</a>
CAP Carpet, Inc.	Kansas City	MO	<a href="http://CAP Carpet">CAP Carpet</a>
Catholic Relief Services	Baltimore	MD	<a href="http://crs.org">crs.org</a>
Cengage Learning	Farmington Hills	MI	<a href="http://cengage.com">cengage.com</a>
Centro	Chicago	IL	<a href="http://Centro.net">Centro.net</a>
Centura Health	Englewood	CO	<a href="http://centura.org">centura.org</a>
CH2M Hill	Englewood	CO	<a href="http://ch2m.com">ch2m.com</a>
Chick-Fil-A	College Park	GA	<a href="http://chick-fil-a.com">chick-fil-a.com</a>
Common Ground	Seattle	WA	<a href="http://commongroundwa.org">commongroundwa.org</a>
Container Store (The)	Coppell	TX	<a href="http://containerstore.com">containerstore.com</a>
Darden Restaurants (Red Lobster, Olive Garden...)	Orlando	FL	<a href="http://darden.com">darden.com</a>
Datron World Communications	Vista	CA	<a href="http://dtwc.com">dtwc.com</a>
Dawn Food Products	Jackson	MI	<a href="http://dawnfoods.com">dawnfoods.com</a>
Delek US Holdings	Brentwood	TN	<a href="http://delekus.com">delekus.com</a>
Evergreen Freedom Foundation	Olympia	WA	<a href="http://effwa.org">effwa.org</a>
Flow Companies	Greensboro	NC	<a href="http://flowauto.com">flowauto.com</a>
Food For The Hungry	Phoenix	AZ	<a href="http://fh.org">fh.org</a>
Gabriel Center	Marietta	GA	<a href="http://gabrielcenter.org">gabrielcenter.org</a>
Green Dot Public Schools	Los Angeles	CA	<a href="http://greendot.org">greendot.org</a>
HCA	Nashville	TN	<a href="http://hcahealthcare.com/">hcahealthcare.com/</a>
Heartland Health	St. Joseph	MO	<a href="http://heartland-health.com">heartland-health.com</a>

Company Name	City	State / Region	Website
HEMCO Gages	Holland	MI	<a href="http://hemcogages.com/">hemcogages.com/</a>
Herman Miller	Zeeland	MI	<a href="http://hermanmiller.com">hermanmiller.com</a>
Herritage Community	Kalamazoo	MI	<a href="http://heritagecommunity.com">heritagecommunity.com</a>
Hess Corporation	Houston	TX	<a href="http://www.hess.com">www.hess.com</a>
High-Tech Professionals	Mexico City	Mexico	<a href="http://hightechpros.com">hightechpros.com</a>
Hill House Association	Pittsburgh	PA	<a href="http://hillhouse.org">hillhouse.org</a>
Interstates Companies	Bloomington	MN	<a href="http://istate.com">istate.com</a>
Insperty Business Solutions	Kingwood	TX	<a href="http://insperty.com">insperty.com</a>
Invision, Inc.	New York	NY	<a href="http://invisioninc.com">invisioninc.com</a>
JTC Education	Atlanta	GA	<a href="http://www.javelintraining.com">www.javelintraining.com</a>
Kaiser Permanente	Oakland	CA	<a href="http://kp.org">kp.org</a>
Keller Williams Realty	San Diego	CA	<a href="http://kw.com">kw.com</a>
Koch Companies	State University	AR	<a href="http://kochcompanies.com/">kochcompanies.com/</a>
Landry's Bicycles	Natick	MA	<a href="http://landrys.com">landrys.com</a>
Liberty Dialysis	Mercer Island	WA	<a href="http://libertydialysis.com/">libertydialysis.com/</a>
Louisiana Hospital Association	Baton Rouge	LA	<a href="http://lhaonline.org">lhaonline.org</a>
Luna Data Solutions, Inc.	Austin	TX	<a href="http://lunadatasolutions.com">lunadatasolutions.com</a>
MAPCO Express	Little Rock	AR	<a href="http://mapcoexpress.com/">mapcoexpress.com/</a>
Marian University	Fond du Lac	WI	<a href="http://marianuniversity.edu">marianuniversity.edu</a>
Marriott International	Bethesda	MD	<a href="http://marriott.com">marriott.com</a>
Matrix Information Consulting	Rochelle Park	NJ	<a href="http://matrixcc.com">matrixcc.com</a>
Medtronic	Minneapolis	MN	<a href="http://medtronic.com">medtronic.com</a>
Men's Wearhouse	Houston	TX	<a href="http://MensWearhouse.com">MensWearhouse.com</a>

Company Name	City	State / Region	Website
ModCloth	San Fransisco	CA	<a href="http://modcloth.com">modcloth.com</a>
Nordstom	Seattle	WA	<a href="http://nordstrom.com">nordstrom.com</a>
Nugget Market	Woodland	CA	<a href="http://nuggetmarket.com">nuggetmarket.com</a>
Oakwood Village	Madison	WI	<a href="http://oakwoodvillage.net">oakwoodvillage.net</a>
Ochsner Health	New Orleans	LA	<a href="http://ochsner.org">ochsner.org</a>
Opportunity International	Oak Brook	IL	<a href="http://opportunity.org">opportunity.org</a>
Organisations That Matter	Melbourne	Australia	<a href="http://orgsthatmatter.com">orgsthatmatter.com</a>
Oschner Health System	New Orleans	LA	<a href="http://ochsner.org">ochsner.org</a>
Paragon Solutions	Cranford	NJ	<a href="http://.consultparagon.com">.consultparagon.com</a>
Pi Beta Phi Fraternity	St. Louis	MO	<a href="http://pibetaphi.org">pibetaphi.org</a>
PPC Partners, Inc.	Milwaukee	WI	<a href="http://pieperpower.com">pieperpower.com</a>
QuikTrip	Tulsa	OK	<a href="http://quiktrip.com">quiktrip.com</a>
Rally Software Development	Boulder	CO	<a href="http://rallydev.com">rallydev.com</a>
REI	Kent	WA	<a href="http://REI.com">REI.com</a>
SAS	Cary	NC	<a href="http://sas.com">sas.com</a>
Savage Companies	Salt Lake City	UT	<a href="http://savageservices.com/">savageservices.com/</a>
Schmidt Associates	Indianapolis	IN	<a href="http://schmidt-arch.com">schmidt-arch.com</a>
Schneider Corporation	Indianapolis	IN	<a href="http://schneidercorp.com">schneidercorp.com</a>
Service Master	Memphis	TN	<a href="http://ServiceMaster.com">ServiceMaster.com</a>
ServiceMaster	Memphis	TN	<a href="http://servicemaster.com">servicemaster.com</a>
Sonrise Christian School	Covina	CA	<a href="http://sonrisechristian.org">sonrisechristian.org</a>
Southwest Airlines	Dallas	TX	<a href="http://southwest.com">southwest.com</a>
Sowing Empowerment & Economic Development, Inc.	Riverdale	MD	<a href="http://seedinc.org">seedinc.org</a>

Company Name	City	State / Region	Website
St. Joseph Regional Medical Center	Lewiston	ID	<a href="http://sjrmc.org">sjrmc.org</a>
Starbucks	Seattle	WA	<a href="http://starbucks.com">starbucks.com</a>
SunDurance Energy	Edison	NJ	<a href="http://sunduranceenergy.com/">sunduranceenergy.com/</a>
Synovus Financial	Columbus	GA	<a href="http://synovus.com">synovus.com</a>
TD Industries	Dallas	TX	<a href="http://tdindustries.com">tdindustries.com</a>
Toro Company	Bloomington	MN	<a href="http://toro.com">toro.com</a>
Trilogy Health Services	Louisville	KY	<a href="http://trilogyhs.com">trilogyhs.com</a>
U.S. Cellular	Chicago	IL	<a href="http://uscellular.com">uscellular.com</a>
United States Air Force	Washington	D.C.	<a href="http://af.mil">af.mil</a>
United States Army	Washington	D.C.	<a href="http://army.mil">army.mil</a>
United States Marine Corps	Washington	D.C.	<a href="http://marines.mil">marines.mil</a>
United States Navy	Washington	D.C.	<a href="http://navy.mil">navy.mil</a>
Vanderbilt University	Nashville	TN	<a href="http://vanderbilt.edu">vanderbilt.edu</a>
Viterbo University	La Crosse	WI	<a href="http://viterbo.edu">viterbo.edu</a>
WageWorks	Leawood	KS	<a href="http://wageworks.com">wageworks.com</a>
Wal-Mart Stores	Bentonville	AR	<a href="http://walmartstores.com">walmartstores.com</a>
WD-40 Company	San Diego	CA	<a href="http://wd40.com">wd40.com</a>
Wegmans	Rochester	NY	<a href="http://wegmans.com">wegmans.com</a>
WesleyLife	West Des Moines	IA	<a href="http://wesleylife.org">wesleylife.org</a>
West Coast Consulting	Irvine	CA	<a href="http://westcoastllc.com">westcoastllc.com</a>
Whitepages.com	Seattle	WA	<a href="http://WhitePages.com">WhitePages.com</a>
Whole Foods	Austin	TX	<a href="http://wholefoodsmarket.com">wholefoodsmarket.com</a>
Witt Kieffer	Springfield	IL	<a href="http://wittkieffer.com">wittkieffer.com</a>

Company Name	City	State / Region	Website
YUM Brands (KFC, Pizza Hut, Long John Silver's & more)	Louisville	KY	<a href="http://yum.com">yum.com</a>
Zappos.com	Las Vegas	NV	<a href="http://Zappos.com">Zappos.com</a>
Zingerman's Community of Business	Ann Arbor	MI	<a href="http://zingermans.com">zingermans.com</a>

## Appendix 2: Leaders' interview guide questions



### Leaders Interview Guide

Participant pseudonym	Department	Country
Reporting to direct manager	Interview date	Interview time

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATION.

This interview is part of qualitative research that aims to identify the relationship between people-centered leadership and sustainability. All your details will be anonymised, and anything that precludes your identity will be removed.

#### Personal Questions

Male                      Female

Position Title:

Years with the company in a managerial position:

Years of experience in sustainability:

#### Introduction question

*Please tell me a bit about your role in the organisation. In what ways are you involved directly or indirectly in the organisation's sustainability efforts?*

#### Interview Questions

- 1. How would you describe the leadership approach used throughout the organisation by leaders/ managers?**
- 2. What is important for you in managing your team? (Behaviour...)**
- 3. How do you support staff to pursue their career goals?**



4. **How do you motivate your team towards organisational goals?**
5. **How are important decisions made within the team? In your department? in the organisation as whole?**
6. **What factors do you consider the most before making a decision or setting up goals?**
7. **How do you view your role in regard to your employees, society, the environment?**
8. **How is that reflected in regard to nature of your company's relationship with them?**
9. **How did the company go about integrating corporate sustainability within the organisation? What changes were needed? (In Processes, systems, outside collaboration?)**
10. **In your view what are the key factors required to integrate sustainability?**
11. **In your experience, what were the main challenges and changes you had to overcome when integrating sustainability?**
12. **What is your experience of how management tried to inspire employees towards caring for their community and the environment?**
13. **In your view, what constitutes a socially and environmentally responsible leader? (*Traits/ character/ behaviour/ motivation/ skills/ other...*)?**

---

*Thank you for your participation.*

---

Agreement to be contacted for further follow-up interviews by researcher.

Yes   
No

---

**Interviewer** Houria Cherid  
**Title:** lead researcher  
**Date:**

## Appendix 3: Employees' Interview guide questions



### Employees Interview Guide

Participant pseudonym	Department	Country
Reporting to direct manager	Interview date	Interview time

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATION

This questionnaire is part of qualitative research that will help to identify the relationship between leadership and corporate sustainability.

### Personal Questions

Male                  Female

1. Position Title:
2. Years with the company:
3. Years of experience in sustainability:

### Open questions

1. Who inspired you the most within the organisation and why?
2. Describe your relationship with your manager/ supervisor.
3. Could you tell me your experience about seeking help from your manager/ supervisor for a personal problem?
4. What is your experience of being supported by your manager/ supervisor to pursue your career goals?
5. Could you tell me your experience about sharing new ideas, making important decisions or handling difficult situations in the way you feel is best?



6. **In your opinion does your manager/supervisor clearly communicate the organisation goals and decisions to you?**
  7. **Could you tell me from your experience whether working in a team inspired your behaviour towards other members, the community and the environment?**
  8. **How would you describe the way your manager/ supervisor deals with change or difficulties?**
  9. **Could you describe an instance when you were encouraged by your manager/ supervisor to be more involved in community activities?**
  10. **Could you describe an instance when you were inspired by your manager/ supervisor to be more concerned about the environment?**
- 

*Thank you for your participation.*

---

Agreement to be contacted for further follow-up interviews by researcher:

Yes   
No

---

**Interviewer** Houria Cherid  
**Title:** lead researcher  
**Date:**

## Appendix 4: Leaders' participant information sheet and signed consent form



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: Leadership & Sustainability

#### Dear Leaders/Managers

Hello, my name is Houria Cherid, PhD candidate and I am conducting a research project in Business management. The project is for my Doctoral/PhD in Nottingham Trent University (NTU)/ NBS. My details are provided below.

My research is about people- centred leadership and how it influences sustainability-oriented behaviours and strategies from managers to employees and can lead the organisation to help make a difference in the world. Sustainability in my research, refers to strategies that reinforce a simultaneous focus on economic, social and environmental performance. These practices aim to create enduring value to all key stakeholders and promote higher ethical behaviours. According to your company's mission statement these practices are what guides them and their leaders.

Your participation would help to gain insights from your experience that would benefit others in making the world a more sustainable and better place.

#### What will it involve?

You will be asked to participate in an interview of about 45 minutes, either online (via Ms Teams) or over the phone, depending on your preference. The interview will consist of a number of open questions about your experience and views regarding the leadership and sustainability. All data collected and any personal information or otherwise you provide will be kept confidential, anonymous and safely stored.

#### How will you protect my confidentiality and anonymity?

We will ask for your written permission to record the interview, to ensure that the information you give us is accurately recorded. The tape of your interview will be transcribed.

Neither the company's name, your name nor your job title will be revealed. You will be asked to use pseudonyms or whether you are happy for these to be selected for you, and you will be referred to as either top/ middle or lower management leader, and will be assigned a unique ID. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise identification risk. A separate log will be used to match your unique ID to contact data to allow communication for follow-up sessions and to be able to trace your data should you wish to withdraw. Your personal data will only be accessed by the researcher – Houria Cherid.

Data from the interviews will be transcribed. Any paper records will be digitised first then destroyed. Any information given in the interview that might potentially identify you will be anonymised and can only be accessed by the researcher. Electronic files are kept on the NTU OneDrive on password protected computers which are not accessible by any other university staff. The transcripts will be fully anonymised before they are archived in the NTU's Institutional Repository (IRep) to benefit further research. Any information that identifies you, or that gives any clues to your identity, will be removed and the tape of your interview will be destroyed.

We are confident that these precautions will ensure that no-one will be able to trace your transcript back to you. You will not be identified in any publication arising from this project either by name or position. Furthermore, any non-publicly available documents happily provided to the researcher that may contain sensitive information will be stored securely in password protected computers which are only accessible by the researcher. All data collected will only be stored at the Nottingham Trent University OneDrive cloud. Electronic files are kept on password protected computers which are not accessible to any other university staff.

Time will be allocated to a ‘debrief’ period at the end of each interview for you to reflect upon it, ask any questions or raise anything that may be of concern.

### **Are there any risks associated with taking part?**

All the risks associated with the research are mainly around participants being able to be identified in this research and in future publications.

The researcher will remove all information that would enable others to easily identify you. This includes your name and the name of your organisation, your position and any other information that may make you easily distinguishable. To further minimise such risk, you will be emailed the transcripts of your answers to check for accuracy and for any potential privacy issues with your data. If you have any concerns email the researcher immediately via their contact information provided below, and researcher would meet with you to go over any potential problems that could arise to your identification. This will be discussed further with you to ensure your agreement on what information to include in this research and future research and publications, and to answer any specific questions you may have.

### **What will happen to the results of this study?**

Once all efforts were made to protect your identity and to ensure your agreement on what information to include in this study and future research, the researcher will first use the results in the PhD thesis. Then plans to use them in published articles, other reports and presentations. Your data will be archived for a minimum of 10 years in the NTU’s Institutional Repository (IRep) to allow documentation as further research opportunities. Any personal or identifiable information will be removed beforehand as mentioned above.

On the other hand, your participation may have great benefits to future leaders who will learn from your experiences in leadership, and which could help other businesses advance further in tackling sustainability issues. Should you have any concerns, please email the researcher or any member of the supervisory team.

### **What happens if I want to withdraw?**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time up to two weeks after taking part in the interview, without giving a reason, and with no repercussion.

If you wish to withdraw, contact the researcher via email providing the pseudonym you have used to be able to trace you. Your data will be immediately removed from any transcripts, analysis or write up, and will not be used in any publications or presentations after you have withdrawn consent.

The researcher's email is provided below, where you can send your withdrawal request as well as to ask for any further information or to express any concerns you might have. The supervisory contacts are also provided.

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## Appendix 5: *Employees' participant information sheet and Signed consent form*



Electronic files are kept on the NTU OneDrive on password protected computers which are not accessible by any other university staff. The transcripts and questionnaire data will be fully anonymised before they are archived in the NTU's Institutional Repository (IRep) to benefit further research. Any information that identifies you, or that gives any clues to your identity, will be removed beforehand. We are confident that these precautions will ensure that no-one will be able to trace your data back to you. You will not be identified in any publication arising from this project either by name or position.

Time will be allocated to a 'debrief' period at the end of each interview for you to reflect upon it, ask any questions or raise anything that may be of concern.

### **Are there any risks associated with taking part?**

All the risks associated with the research are mainly around participants being able to be identified in this research and in future publications. Appropriate risk management procedures have been put in place. The researcher will remove all information that would enable others to easily identify you. This includes your name and the name of your organisation, your position and any other information that may make you easily distinguishable. To further minimise such risk, you will be emailed the transcripts of your answers to check for accuracy and for potential privacy issues with your data. If you have any concerns email the researcher immediately via their contact information provided below, and researcher would meet with you to go over any potential problems that could arise as a way to your identification. This will be discussed further with you to ensure your agreement on what information to include in this research and future research and publications, and to answer any specific questions you may have.

### **What will happen to the results of this study?**

Once all efforts were made to protect your identity and to ensure your agreement on what information to include in this study and future research, the researcher will first use the results in the PhD research thesis. Then, plans to use them in published articles, other reports and presentations. Your data will be archived for a minimum of 10 years in the NTU's Institutional Repository (IRep) to allow documentation as further research opportunities. Any personal or identifiable information will be removed beforehand as mentioned above.

On the other hand, your participation may have great benefits to future leaders who will learn from your experiences in leadership and which could help other businesses advance further in tackling sustainability issues. Should you have any concerns, please email the researcher or any member of the supervisory team.

### **What happens if I want to withdraw?**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time up to two weeks after taking part in the interviews, without giving a reason and with no repercussions. You may also choose to take part in only one of the sessions you are invited to. If you wish to withdraw, contact the researcher via email providing the pseudonym you have used to be able to trace you.

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