

**Leadership Across Contexts: Empirical Investigations into  
Individual, Organizational and National Leadership Phenomena**

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**First Supervisor:** Prof. Dr. Markus Reihlen, Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg

**First Reviewer:** Prof. Dr. Markus Reihlen, Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg

**Second Reviewer:** Prof. Dr. Ursula Weisenfeld, Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg

**Third Reviewer:** Prof. em. Dr. Rainhart Lang, Technische Universität Chemnitz

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Exploring Leadership Beyond Contextual Boundaries**

Leadership, as a research domain, continues to evolve in response to the increasingly complex demands of organisations operating in diverse global environments. As the challenges of sustainability, organisational adaptability, and cultural diversity intensify, leadership has transitioned from being perceived as an individual attribute to a contextually nuanced, multi-faceted phenomenon (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Scholars like Denis, Langley, & Sergi (2012) have advanced the notion of “leadership in the plural,” emphasizing that leadership should be understood as a collective, contextually embedded activity rather than a singular, top-down process. This change in thinking reflects the growing recognition that leadership is profoundly influenced by the social, cultural, and organisational contexts in which it occurs (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Although substantial research has been conducted on various leadership models, including transformational (Bass, 1994), ethical (Brown & Treviño, 2006) and authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), there is a lack of understanding regarding how leadership is adapted and enacted in specific contexts, such as individual, organisational, and national settings. This dissertation seeks to bridge this gap by presenting three empirical studies that investigate leadership phenomena in different contextual environments.

### **Philosophical Foundation**

The study of leadership has been grounded in various philosophical traditions that influence both the methodological approaches and the interpretation of leadership phenomena. Traditionally, positivism has dominated leadership research, focusing on measuring leadership behaviours and outcomes through quantitative methods (Bass, 1994). This approach, aligned with the belief in objective, observable reality, has enabled the development of models such as transformational leadership and transactional leadership, which seek to generalize leadership traits and behaviours across various contexts (Northouse, 2018). However, leadership research has increasingly embraced interpretivism, constructivism, and post-positivism, which recognize the socially constructed nature of leadership (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). These paradigms challenge the idea of a universal leadership model, arguing that leadership is contingent on relational dynamics, cultural norms, and the specific context in which it is enacted (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2010). Constructivism emphasizes that leadership is co-created

by leaders and followers through contextually embedded interactions (Grint, 2005; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). From a critical perspective, leadership studies have also incorporated elements of critical theory, which questions power dynamics, hegemonic leadership models, and the role of discourse in shaping leadership practices (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Postcolonial perspectives in leadership research further challenge the dominant paradigms by highlighting the underrepresentation of women and non-Western perspectives in leadership theories (Chin, Desormeaux, & Sawyer, 2016).

The onto-epistemological assumptions in leadership research are essential for understanding the philosophical foundations that guide the methodological choices and interpretation of findings within this dissertation. Ontology refers to the nature of reality and what constitutes knowledge, while epistemology focuses on how we come to know that reality (Bunge, 1996). In leadership research, these assumptions vary depending on the theoretical frameworks, methods, and contexts employed. The empirical studies in this dissertation reflect specific onto-epistemological positions that align with the unique leadership phenomena investigated across the different studies in individual, organizational, and national contexts.

In this dissertation, leadership phenomena are context-dependent, dynamic, and socially constructed. This ontological stance leans towards a constructivist view, which posits that leadership is not a fixed, universal trait but is co-created through interactions between leaders, followers, and the broader environment (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leadership is as an emergent process shaped by specific cultural, organizational, and individual factors, aligning with a relational and contextual ontology (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012). This approach allows exploring how leadership manifests differently across micro-political, ambidextrous, and implicit contexts. Study 1, for instance, explores sustainable leadership practices within the micro-political sphere of human resource management, assuming that leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon influenced by the interpersonal dynamics and power relations between HR managers and their collaborators. This study embraces an ontological stance that leadership is co-created and contingent upon individual and situational factors rather than being an inherent quality of individuals (Rouleau, 2005). Similarly, the second study employs a processual ontology to examine the ambidextrous leadership practices within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which is as a process of balancing the competing demands of control and innovation. Leadership here is as an ongoing process that evolves with organizational needs, driven by both human agency and contextual conditions (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011). Finally, Study 3's

examination of implicit leadership theories within the media landscape aligns with an interpretivist ontology, recognizing that leadership prototypes are culturally constructed and mediated through societal narratives. The study assumes that leadership is shaped by cultural values and media discourses, which influence how leadership is perceived and enacted at a national level (Qadach, Schechter, & Da'as, 2020).

The epistemological assumptions guiding this dissertation follow a social constructivist approach, where knowledge of leadership is derived from the shared experiences, interpretations, and interactions of individuals within specific contexts. This epistemology acknowledges that knowledge is not objectively given but is constructed through subjective experiences and social processes. The dissertation draws on empirical data to investigate how different leadership phenomena are understood and enacted in various contexts, emphasizing the importance of context-specific knowledge. In Study 1, the epistemology reflects a focus on the lived experiences of HR managers, using qualitative methods to uncover how they navigate their roles through micro-political influence tactics. Knowledge is gained through understanding the strategies they employ to maintain their position and contribute to organizational success, emphasizing an interpretive approach to leadership research. Study 2 adopts a more pragmatic epistemology, where leadership knowledge is generated through case studies of SMEs to identify how ambidextrous leadership is practiced in diverse organizational cultures. This approach acknowledges that knowledge is shaped by practical realities and aims to uncover actionable insights that can inform sustainable leadership practices in similar organizational settings (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Simsek, 2009).

Study 3 operates under a deductive-modernist epistemological framework, using content analysis to explore how implicit leadership theories are represented in the German media. The study assumes that leadership knowledge is mediated by cultural narratives and public discourses, which shape societal understandings of leadership prototypes. The role of media in constructing and disseminating leadership models highlights the importance of cultural context in the production of leadership knowledge (Barmeyer, Bausch, & Moncayo, 2019).

The philosophical foundation of this dissertation aligns with a critical realism and partly positivist approach, which recognizes the existence of an external reality that is socially constructed but also influenced by structural and contextual factors. Critical realism bridges the gap between constructivist and realist ontologies by acknowledging that leadership is both shaped by human agency and constrained by structural conditions (Bhaskar, 2014). This

approach allows for an investigation of leadership as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon, while still recognizing the influence of underlying structures such as organizational culture, power dynamics, and national values. In this dissertation, the critical realist stance is particularly relevant in understanding how leadership phenomena vary across individual, organizational, and national contexts. It emphasizes the need to explore both the subjective experiences of leaders and followers and the objective conditions that influence leadership practices, such as organizational structures, cultural values, and societal expectations. The onto-epistemological assumptions outlined above have significant implications for the research methods employed. Considering the constructivist and interpretivist foundations, the initial two studies employ qualitative methods, including case studies, interviews, and content analyses, to uncover the complex and context-specific nature of leadership phenomena. In the third study, these qualitative methods are complemented by a modernist and quantitative methods of descriptive statistics. The methods outlined above are well-suited to exploring the socially constructed aspects of leadership and capturing the nuanced ways in which leadership is enacted across different contexts. Likewise, the pragmatic focus on generating actionable knowledge, particularly in Study 2, supports the use of comparative case studies to identify patterns and practices that can inform leadership in SMEs. This approach reflects the epistemological commitment to produce contextually relevant and applicable insights (Simsek, 2009).

The onto-epistemological assumptions of this dissertation position leadership as a socially constructed, context-dependent, and dynamic phenomenon. The critical realist stance allows for an exploration of both the subjective and structural dimensions of leadership, while the social constructivist epistemology emphasizes the importance of understanding leadership as a relational and interpretive process. These philosophical foundations guide the methodological choices, ensuring that the empirical studies contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of leadership phenomena in individual, organizational, and national contexts.

### **Methodological Foundation**

Methodologically, leadership studies have traditionally relied on quantitative approaches, particularly in early research on leadership traits and behaviours (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Survey-based methods, experiments, and meta-analyses have been central to understanding leadership effectiveness (Hiller et al., 2011). The present study employs a multi-method approach that permits the generalization of findings across a range of organizational

contexts. This enables insights to be gained into the relationships between leadership styles and organizational outcomes (Judge et al., 2002). However, as leadership has become recognized as a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon, qualitative methods have gained prominence. Case studies, ethnographies, and content analysis enable researchers to explore the complexity of leadership in specific organizational, cultural, and national contexts (Conger, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). These methods are particularly useful for understanding how leadership is enacted in real-world settings and how it is influenced by factors such as power, culture, and organizational norms (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). The dissertation employs a mixed- and multi-methods approach to capture the multifaceted nature of leadership. The first study uses surveys and qualitative interviews to explore how German HR managers employ micro-political influence tactics to balance sustainable leadership and organizational objectives. The second study uses a comparative case study design to examine ambidextrous leadership in SMEs, drawing on both qualitative interviews and quantitative performance data. The third study employs quantitative content analysis to investigate how leadership is portrayed in German newspapers, analysing implicit leadership theories reflected in media representations.

### **Current Challenges in Leadership Across Contexts**

The field of leadership studies has undergone a significant evolution, reflecting the increasing complexities of leading across various individual, organisational and national contexts. These complexities are further intensified by the current global challenges, including the rapid advancement of technology, the growing emphasis on sustainability, the intensification of globalisation, and the transition towards more inclusive and diverse leadership paradigms. It is crucial for leadership research to address these changes, identifying the discrepancies and tensions that exist between different leadership theories and practices. This chapter outlines the key challenges faced by those engaged in leadership research and practice across contexts.

#### Leadership in Multilevel Contexts

One of the most pressing challenges in leadership research is addressing the multilevel nature of leadership phenomena. Leadership does not occur in isolation but is shaped by interactions at multiple levels - individual, team, organization, and society. According to Denis, Langley, and Sergi (2012), leadership in modern organizations is increasingly pluralistic, with power and influence dispersed across various actors and networks rather than concentrated in a single

leader. This complexity makes it difficult to develop universal leadership models, as leadership behaviour can change significantly depending on the context.

Leadership research must contend with the challenge of integrating these various levels, especially when moving beyond leader-centric approaches to explore the broader social, cultural, and organizational contexts (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). This multilevel complexity is particularly evident when addressing leadership phenomena like ambidextrous leadership, which requires leaders to simultaneously balance the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011).

#### Balancing Ambidextrous Leadership

The rise of ambidextrous leadership, the ability to balance exploitation of existing capabilities with the exploration of new opportunities, has introduced new challenges for leaders, particularly within the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Leaders in these organizations face the dual pressures of maintaining operational efficiency while fostering innovation, yet many struggle to balance these demands effectively (Turner, Swart, & Maylor, 2013). Ambidextrous leadership requires adaptability and the ability to manage paradoxes, but organizational cultures can often inhibit this balance. A culture focused on stability may stifle creativity, while one focused on innovation can undermine operational consistency (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Rosing, Frese, and Bausch (2011) argue that ambidextrous leadership is not simply about balancing exploitation and exploration but involves context-specific adjustments in leadership style, depending on organizational needs. This flexibility presents a significant challenge in leadership research, as it demands a nuanced understanding of how leaders switch between these modes across various contexts. Current leadership models often fail to capture the fluidity required to manage the complexity, necessitating more dynamic approaches that can account for contextual variations.

#### Navigating Sustainable Leadership

In the context of increasing global awareness around sustainability, leadership research has shifted towards understanding how leaders can promote long-term environmental, social, and economic sustainability within organizations. However, a significant challenge lies in the conceptual and practical integration of sustainable leadership within existing leadership frameworks. Sustainable leadership requires leaders to prioritize long-term well-being over short-term gains, often in the face of significant resistance from stakeholders focused on

immediate results (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). Recent studies, such as those by Lang & Keuscher (2020), emphasize the growing importance of sustainable human resource management (HRM) as a key component of sustainable leadership. Yet, many organizations and leadership models still struggle to align sustainability with profitability, particularly in highly competitive environments. This creates a tension between pursuing long-term sustainable goals and addressing immediate business pressures, which is especially evident in sectors like manufacturing and SMEs (Tideman, Arts, & Zandee, 2013). Leadership research must continue to explore how leaders can overcome these challenges by developing sustainable leadership models that align with organizational strategy and culture.

#### Implicit Leadership Theories and Cultural Influence

Another critical challenge in leadership research is the role of implicit leadership theories (ILTs) and the influence of national culture on leadership perceptions and practices. ILTs refer to the cognitive frameworks that individuals use to make sense of leadership behaviours, which are deeply influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations (Epitropaki et al., 2013). These implicit theories can create biases in leadership selection and evaluation, often leading to discrepancies between perceived and actual leadership effectiveness. Leadership research faces the challenge of understanding how these implicit theories vary across cultural contexts. For example, culturally endorsed leadership theories (CLT) suggest that certain leadership attributes, such as autonomy or charisma, may be valued differently depending on the national culture (Sertel, Karadag, & Ergin-Kocatürk, 2022). However, few studies have systematically examined the intersection of ILTs and cultural narratives in shaping leadership models across different countries. This is particularly relevant in today's globalized world, where leaders often navigate diverse cultural leadership expectations and prototypes.

#### The Role of Media and Public Perception in Leadership

The media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of leadership, yet this remains an under-explored area in leadership research. Media portrayals of leadership often reinforce certain stereotypes, influencing how leadership is understood and enacted in different national contexts. For example, newspapers may emphasize charismatic leadership in business contexts, while portraying more humane-oriented leadership in political or social arenas (Barmeyer, Bausch, & Moncayo, 2019). This media-driven narrative can influence both the expectations placed on leaders and the leadership behaviours that are deemed acceptable or effective in

distinct cultures. The challenge for leadership research is to uncover how these media portrayals affect leadership prototypes and contribute to implicit leadership theories. Studies that integrate media analysis with leadership research, such as focusing on newspaper illustrations of leadership, provide valuable insights into the public's evolving understanding of leadership, but more research is needed to explore the dynamic relationship between media, culture, and leadership (Den Hartog & Dickson, 2004).

#### Diversity and Inclusion in Leadership

The drive for greater diversity and inclusion in leadership roles presents both a significant opportunity and a challenge for leadership research. There is a growing recognition among organisations of the necessity for inclusive leadership models that address gender, racial and cultural diversity. However, the challenge lies in the development of leadership frameworks that not only promote diversity but also facilitate its integration into organisational culture and leadership practices (House et al., 1997). The prevailing leadership models frequently prove inadequate in accounting for the intricacies of leading diverse teams, particularly regarding issues such as unconscious bias and the incorporation of marginalised groups in decision-making processes (Chin, 2013). It is crucial for leadership researchers to develop inclusive leadership models that are not only theoretically robust but also practical for implementation in diverse organisational contexts. This includes an investigation of the ways in which leaders can establish inclusive work environments that capitalise on the strengths of a diverse workforce, while simultaneously addressing the systemic barriers that frequently impede the advancement of marginalised individuals into leadership roles.

#### **Contribution of the Dissertation**

To analyse the contributions of this dissertation, I adopt Van de Ven's (2007) Engaged Scholarship Model, a framework that emphasizes the co-production of knowledge through collaboration between researchers and practitioners. This model is particularly relevant for this dissertation as it not only explores leadership phenomena across various contexts but also aims to contribute both to academic knowledge and practical leadership practices. The Engaged Scholarship Model includes four key processes: 1. Problem formulation, 2. Theory development, 3. Research design, and 4. Problem-solving. The value of the dissertation can be evaluated by examining its contributions in the context of these four stages.

### Problem Formulation

The first contribution of this dissertation lies in its identification of contextual gaps in leadership research. By focusing on micro-political, ambidextrous, and implicit leadership theories, the dissertation highlights the limitations of existing leadership models that treat leadership as a one-size-fits-all phenomenon which is still part of some recent theories. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of theories which conceptualise leadership as multi-dimensional and context dependent and challenge this (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2025; Hanna et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). The problem formulation process in this dissertation reflects a deep engagement with the current challenges facing leadership theory, particularly the need for context-specific leadership frameworks. Study 1 reflects a nuanced understanding of how leadership operates within specific power dynamics and organizational structures (Rouleau, 2005).

### Theory Development

The second major contribution is the development of contextualized leadership theories. Using empirical data from diverse contexts, the studies develop new theoretical insights into how leadership operates across various levels. Study 2 contributes to ambidextrous leadership theory by introducing the concept of “non-exploitative exploitation,” a balance between control and autonomy that fosters long-term sustainability in SMEs. This theoretical development expands on existing models of ambidextrous leadership by emphasizing the role of organizational culture in shaping leadership behaviours (Wenke et al., 2021). Study 3 contributes to implicit leadership theories by integrating media analysis, offering a novel approach to understanding how cultural narratives shape leadership prototypes. This contribution extends implicit leadership theory beyond individual cognition to include societal influences, such as media portrayals and cultural expectations (Epitropaki, & Martin, 2004).

### Problem Solving Research Design

The third contribution is methodological, as the dissertation employs a mixed- and multi-method approach to investigate leadership phenomena across different contexts. By using case studies, interviews, and quantitative content analysis, the research design reflects a commitment to methodological pluralism, ensuring that the research captures the complexity and diversity of leadership behaviours across contexts (Creswell, 2014). This methodological contribution addresses the gap in leadership research regarding the need for diverse and contextually appropriate research methods (Denis et al., 2010). Finally, the dissertation makes practical

contributions by offering actionable insights for leadership practitioners by engaging with real-world leadership challenges, such as the tensions between sustainability and profitability or the balance between control and autonomy in SMEs.

#### Addressing Gaps in Leadership Research

Despite the wealth of research on leadership, several critical gaps remain. Theoretical Gaps: The concept of sustainable leadership has been well-explored in terms of environmental and ethical concerns (Doh & Quigley, 2014, Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011), but there is limited research on how sustainability interacts with the micro-political dynamics within organizations (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Rouleau, 2005). Similarly, ambidextrous leadership has been extensively studied in large firms (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011), but its applicability to SMEs remains underexplored (Simsek, 2009; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Additionally, while implicit leadership theories have been examined in cross-cultural contexts, there is little research on how media representations shape national perceptions of leadership. Leadership research has historically favoured quantitative methods that emphasize generalizability (Bass, 1994), but there is a growing recognition of the need for mixed and multi-method approaches that can capture the complexity of leadership in diverse contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). Moreover, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that track how leadership behaviours evolve over time in response to changing organizational and cultural contexts (Hernandez et al., 2021). Most leadership research has focused on Western, individualistic leadership models, with limited attention given to cross-cultural and national contexts (Chin, Desormeaux, & Sawyer, 2016). This lack of diversity in leadership studies has resulted in a narrow understanding of how leadership is perceived and enacted in non-Western contexts (Sertel, Karadag, & Ergin-Kocatürk, 2022). Furthermore, research on leadership in SMEs, especially in relation to sustainability and ambidexterity, remains sparse (Turner, Swart, & Maylor, 2013). This dissertation addresses the identified gaps through three empirical studies: By investigating the micro-political influence tactics of HR managers in Germany, the 1<sup>st</sup> study contributes to the understanding of how sustainable leadership is enacted within the individual context. It bridges the theoretical gap between sustainable HRM and micro-political dynamics, showing how HR professionals balance competing demands to maintain organizational sustainability (Lang & Keuscher, 2020). The 2<sup>nd</sup> study contributes to the literature on ambidextrous leadership by exploring how SME leaders align the demands for exploration and exploitation. It introduces the concept of “non-exploitative exploitation,” providing new insights into how ambidextrous

leadership can promote sustainability in smaller firms (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). The 3<sup>rd</sup> study addresses the empirical gap in research on implicit leadership theories by examining how leadership is represented in German media. It provides a new perspective on how national culture shapes leadership prototypes through media portrayals, contributing to the understanding of the interaction between leadership, culture, and media (Den Hartog & Dickson, 2004; House et al., 1997; Eagly & Heilman, 2016).

**Table 1.1**  
**Articles of the Dissertation**

No.	Article	Co-Author	Publisher	Status
1	Towards a sustainable Human Resource Management: Bridging professional capital and sustainable micro-political influence tactics of German Human Resources Managers <a href="https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-1363">https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-1363</a>	Rainhart Lang	PUN - Editions Universitaires de Lorraine	Published 2020
2	Sustainable Leadership Activities in SMEs: Can Non-Exploitative Exploitation Support Long-Term Orientation? <a href="https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-1083">https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-1083</a>	Hannah Vergossen	Journal of Leadership and Management	Published 2024
3	Media Narratives of Leadership: A Decade of German Newspaper Discourse <a href="https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-1732">https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-1732</a>	Single- authored	Journal of Leadership and Management	Published 2025

## **Discussion**

The findings of this dissertation contribute to multiple streams of leadership research, particularly in understanding the contextual nature of leadership in different individual, organizational, and national environments. By addressing the gaps identified in previous research, this work not only provides empirical insights but also broadens the theoretical horizons of sustainable leadership, ambidextrous leadership, and implicit leadership theories (ILT). The first study on the micro-political dynamics of German HR managers demonstrates that sustainability in leadership extends beyond environmental and ethical considerations. HR managers engage in soft, proactive influence tactics to balance the dual roles of strategic business partners and HR specialists. These micro-political tactics contribute to the development of a sustainable Human Resource Management (HRM) system, adding a new dimension to existing sustainable leadership literature. This study highlights the importance of understanding leaders' every day, behind-the-scenes actions to navigate organizational politics while promoting long-term goals (Lang & Keuscher, 2020). Furthermore, it reinforces the role of social capital and relational dynamics as key elements in sustainable leadership, echoing earlier calls for more contextually aware leadership frameworks (Wenke, 2021; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Bourdieu, 1986). The second study provides fresh insights into ambidextrous leadership by focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It introduces the concept of “non-exploitative exploitation,” which refers to leaders' ability to balance the inherent tension between control and autonomy without exploiting employees. This study highlights the importance of organizational culture in shaping how ambidextrous leadership manifests in SMEs. Familial cultures foster loyalty and sustainability but can inhibit innovation, whereas innovation-driven cultures promote competitiveness but may risk employee dissatisfaction (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011). These findings extend existing research by illustrating how ambidextrous leadership operates in smaller firms, contributing to the ongoing debate about whether ambidexterity is equally applicable in large and small organizations (Turner, Swart, & Maylor, 2013). This study also addresses the methodological gap by using a comparative case study approach to explore the nuances of leadership in SMEs, offering a richer, more context-sensitive understanding of leadership behaviours. The third study contributes to the cross-cultural leadership literature by exploring how implicit leadership theories are reflected in German media. The quantitative content analysis reveals that German newspapers emphasize autonomous and humane-oriented leadership, aligning with national cultural values of individualism and social responsibility (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). This

study underscores the importance of media in shaping public perceptions of leadership, which has implications for understanding how leadership prototypes are constructed and maintained at the national level. The study also reveals discrepancies in how distinct types of newspapers (business-oriented vs. sensationalist) portray leadership, suggesting that media representations are not uniform and are influenced by the target audience. This opens new avenues for research on the interaction between media, culture, and leadership perceptions (Den Hartog & Dickson, 2004). Sustainability has emerged as a critical focus in leadership studies, with Avery & Bergsteiner (2011) introducing sustainable leadership as a key to long-term organizational resilience. The balance between exploration and exploitation, known as ambidextrous leadership (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011), has also gained traction, particularly in research on organizational adaptability and innovation. Meanwhile, implicit leadership theories (ILT), which explore culturally influenced perceptions of leadership, are underexplored in terms of their representation in the media and impact on national leadership paradigms. This dissertation addresses these gaps by investigating 1) Micro-political dynamics of HR managers in individual contexts, with a focus on sustainable leadership practices, 2) Ambidextrous leadership in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and how leadership can balance conflicting demands to foster sustainable growth and 3) The representation of implicit leadership theories in German media, exploring how national cultural values shape leadership perceptions. Together, these studies contribute to a broader understanding of how leadership is shaped by context, and how it can be both sustainable and adaptive. This work aims to advance the field by providing empirical evidence that addresses existing theoretical, empirical and practical gaps.

## **Conclusion**

The dissertation advances leadership research by providing empirical evidence across three diverse contexts: individual (HR managers), organizational (SMEs), and national (media representation). It demonstrates that leadership is context-dependent, and sustainable leadership practices must be tailored to the specific challenges and dynamics of each environment. The three studies contribute to the broader leadership literature in the following ways: **Theoretical Contribution:** The dissertation enriches theories of sustainable leadership by showing how micro-political tactics and social capital contribute to organizational sustainability. It also introduces the novel concept of “non-exploitative exploitation” in ambidextrous leadership, particularly within SMEs, and extends implicit leadership theory research by analysing how leadership is portrayed in national media. The use of multi-methods in this dissertation,

combining surveys, case studies, and quantitative content analysis, offers a robust approach to studying leadership in diverse contexts. This methodological diversity provides a comprehensive understanding of how leadership is enacted and perceived, addressing the gap in previous leadership studies that relied heavily on either quantitative or qualitative methods alone. **Practical Implication:** From a practical perspective, this research offers valuable insights for HR professionals, SME leaders, and media practitioners. HR managers can better understand the role of influence tactics in maintaining sustainable leadership. SME leaders can apply the principles of ambidextrous leadership to foster long-term growth, while the media can reflect on how their representations of leadership may influence public leadership perceptions and expectations. This synopsis and chapter structure provide an in-depth exploration of leadership in context, examining sustainable leadership, ambidextrous leadership, and implicit leadership theories. Each chapter builds upon empirical research to address theoretical and empirical gaps, offering contributions to the field of leadership studies. While this dissertation makes significant contributions to the leadership field, several limitations should be acknowledged. The first study focused exclusively on German HR managers in large organizations, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to HR managers in smaller firms or in diverse cultural contexts. Future research could expand the sample to include HR professionals from diverse countries and organizational sizes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable leadership across different contexts. The focus on German newspapers in the third study may limit the applicability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Implicit leadership theories are culturally embedded, and leadership prototypes may vary significantly in other national media. Cross-cultural comparisons would offer deeper insights into how leadership perceptions differ across countries. The studies conducted are cross-sectional, offering a snapshot of leadership phenomena at a single point in time. Longitudinal research would provide a more dynamic view of how leadership practices evolve in response to changing organizational and societal conditions. Although the mixed-methods approach provides depth, it also presents challenges in integrating findings across different methods. Future research could refine these methods to explore how qualitative insights can complement quantitative data in a more structured manner.

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## Chapter 2

### Micro-Political and Sustainable Leadership in Individual Contexts

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#### Abstract

This study investigates the professional capital and the sustainable micro-political influence tactics; German Human Resources Managers use to contribute to the organizational success and maintain and develop their position within the organization. In larger organizations, HR Managers must fulfil the contradictory roles of a human resources specialist and of a strategic business partner at the same time. We use the concepts of professional capital and of sustainable micro-political influence tactics to identify the patterns, managers' use in daily activities, allowing them to serve both roles on a long run. The results of our study show, that HR professionals use soft influence tactics and tend to combine them with other proactive influence tactics to reach a desired outcome and develop a socially sustainable relationship to main collaborators. In that sense, German HR Manager contribute to a sustainable HRM system and seem to be prepared for further professional developments.

**Keywords:** Micro-political leadership, Sustainable leadership, Influence tactics, Professional capital, Human Resource Manager

**Towards a Sustainable Human Resource Management:  
Bridging Professional Capital and Sustainable Micro-political Influence Tactics  
of German Human Resources Managers**

**Introduction**

Our paper addresses the status of HR professionals within the organizations and investigates how HR managers, as a group of stakeholders in the organization, try to acquire influence by adopting more strategic and sustainable HRM activities and respective micro-political leadership tactics. Following the early notion of Legge (1978) and Purcell (1996) about the powerlessness and marginality of HR professionals in strategic decision making, several more recent studies described changes in status and power positions of HR managers and their departments (e.g. Marchington, 2015; Lang & Rego, 2015; Sheehan et al., 2014; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013; Ulrich et al., 2013; Boudreau & Lawler, 2012; Roche & Teague, 2012). Empirical studies also showed that important elements of their professional power base, like specialized professional HRM knowledge, control over HR activities and possibilities to manage the interpretation of meaning in the organization, are under threat by changing role expectations of other actors in the organization. HR managers face a shift of focus towards strategic management roles (e.g. Sheehan et al., 2014). At the same time, these changes provide opportunities for HR professionals to strengthen their position in the organization, and to contribute to the organizational success. However, it is still a question how far the roles of strategic advisors or business partners have really gained ground in daily HRM activities, instead of being part of expected business talks of HR professionals (e.g. Keegan & Francis, 2010; Roche & Teague, 2012). Recent debates are also interested in knowing, how individual activities contribute to a sustainable Human Resources Management System (Ehnert, 2016). Therefore, we are going to investigate the patterns of daily activities of HR Managers and departments, their consequences for their position within the organization and their contribution to sustainable HRM. In the state-of-the-art chapter, we refer to different studies that emphasize the tensions that HR professionals face by changing role expectations, how they respond to it, and influence their power position within the organization. After the state-of-research chapter, we explain our theoretical foundation. To understand the power basis of HRM professionals, we use a special application of the concept of capital from Bourdieu (1986; Bourdieu, 1992), namely the concept of professional capital from Nordegraaf & Schinkel (2011). We link their concept to the concept of micro-political influence tactics from Yukl (2006) with a focus on

socially sustainable influence tactics (Lee et al., 2017). We assume that building sustainable relations to important actors in the firm is essential for the professional perspective of HR managers and experts. The following chapter explains methodology, methods and sample of our empirical study. We are using a qualitative interview approach based on interviews with 39 German HR managers from large to medium-sized organizations. We investigate:

- Patterns of the daily activities of HR managers and departments, and how they currently address role expectations of a sustainable HRM
- Power positions of HR departments, and the professional capital on which these power positions of HRM are based on
- Micro-political influence tactics of HR departments and HR managers as their representatives aimed at gaining a socially sustainable influence within the organization

Next, we describe our main results with respect to professional capital, changing role expectations, daily activities and sustainable micro-political influence tactics of German Resources Managers. In the last section, we discuss our findings in contrast to already existing studies and draw conclusions for further research (Lang et al., 2017).

### **State of Research**

Several more recent studies described changes in status and power positions of HR managers and their departments (e.g. Dai et al., 2016; Lang & Rego, 2015; Marchington, 2015; Sheehan et al., 2014; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013; Ulrich et al., 2013; Boudreau & Lawler, 2012; Roche & Teague, 2012). In their study, Reichel and Lazarova (2013) underline, that despite the centrality that has been rhetorically assigned to HRM activities, HR departments often experience marginality in every-day-practice. They stress that the status of HR departments is negatively influenced by the devolvement of line managers and positively influenced by the outsourcing of non-core HR tasks. Furthermore, the study by Sheenan et al. (2014) puts an emphasis on the power position of HR professionals. It shows that important elements of the professional power basis of HRM, like specialized and professional HRM knowledge, control over HRM activities or the possibilities to manage meaning within the organization are under

threat by role expectations towards strategic roles. Roche & Teague even state, that “...the new business partner role of HR has not yet become strategically oriented or organizationally embedded in any reconfiguration of the HR function and how HR is aligned with business” (Roche & Teague, 2012: 1353). It is advantageous for HR professionals to talk the language of their business partners in face of changing role expectations (e.g. Keegan & Francis, 2010). Additionally, Roche & Teague (2012) found that expertise in operational HRM activities might be helpful to gain influence in the managerial decision-making process and, at the same time, maintain the power status of HRM even in times of recession. Furthermore, other authors have pointed to different communication strategies of HR professionals like developing, claiming or demonstrating professional competencies (e.g. Sheenan, 2014; Ulrich et al., 2013; Boudreau & Lawler, 2012) as important activities to improve power position within the organization. In a more recent study, Dai et al. (2016) showed, how the HR department of a state-owned company in China, successfully improved its power positions and established a closer relationship to the business department by increasing the efficiency of their talent management for the group and transforming the HR department from a cost into a profit centre. In contrast, Marchington (2015) examined the development of human resources departments in the UK and argued that with an overemphasize on strategic business partnerships, HR departments lose focus, influence and a unique selling point because it has disregarded the employee champion or advocate role. Thus, HR might subsequently be subsumed and dominated by other functions, such as finance and marketing. To reach a sustainable position of influence within the organization, HRM must adapt “... strategies and practices that enables the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals [...] over a long- time horizon” (Ehnert, 2016: 3). The recent scientific contributions to such a sustainable HRM (e.g. Renwick et al., 2016; Ehnert et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2011) focus on content related strategies, and the building of sustainable HRM systems, but neglect the underlying micro-political influence strategies and tactics (Lee et al., 2017). Most studies on power positions of HR professionals and departments have several shortcomings.

Firstly, the studies addressed the situation in an Anglo-Saxon context. There are just very few studies from other cultural regions or institutional settings like Eastern-Europe (e.g. Kazlauskaitė & Bučiūnienė, 2010; Poor et al., 2011; Hirt & Ortlieb, 2012; Kohont & Brewster, 2014; Poor et al., 2015) or Germany (e.g. Lang & Rego, 2015; Link & Müller, 2015, Bader, 2016; Keegan, Brandl, & Aust, 2018). Although some aspects of power positions are

mentioned, the focus of many studies is on other aspects. The focus of Lang & Regos's study (2015) was on perceived tensions of HR managers, and respective coping strategies, while Link & Müller (2015) put an emphasis on line manager as HR workers, and consequences for professional HRM. Bader's interest (2016) was also line manager's role as people managers. Finally, Keegan and her colleagues discuss in their conceptual paper how HR practitioners can handle all-day tensions. They draw on paradox theory and suggest response strategies like suppressing, opposing, splitting or adjusting. Secondly, most of the studies with a focus on power positions of HRM but do not or rarely address strategies and tactics of HR professionals and their departments. If strategies or tactics are addressed at all, a focus on sustainable strategies that build stable relationships to important actors in the organization are missing. Thirdly, many studies are under-theorized, lacking a sound theoretical framework from social and/or organization theory. This includes a lack of meso-level approaches for organizational power structures, restructurings, and implementations of new organizational models, like the "business partner model", for HRM. They also lack micro-level approaches to explain the actions of individual or collective organizational professionals, like HR managers. Our paper addresses these shortcomings by developing an adequate theoretical frame, which combines two already established theoretical approaches, which have been rarely used for explaining the situation of HR professionals. Moreover, we examine a distinctive data set comprising interviews with German HR managers and experts conducted over a period of more than ten years. This allows us to draw inferences regarding the current state and future developments of challenges, and the strategies employed by HR managers to address these challenges. In conclusion, we address the issue of sustainability by examining the long-term patterns of professional capital, the transition of HR roles and micro-political tactics.

### **Theoretical Background**

Our analysis is theoretically based on a combination of two concepts. The first concept is Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, especially the idea of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital of actors in certain fields of action (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu 1992). Focusing on organizational professions like Human Resource managers and experts, the available capital can be described as professional capital. Noordegraaf and Schinkel further developed this idea on (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011; Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011). The second theoretical approach is the concept of micro-politics, more precisely micro-political strategies and tactics (e.g. Crozier & Friedberg, 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Neuberger, 1995; Blickle, 2003; Yukl,

2006). Here, we are looking especially at socially sustainable strategies (Lee et al., 2017). While professional capital of HR professionals, managers, experts, and respective departments, can be seen as the structural basis for action, the micro-political strategies address the technical, social and political activities of HR professionals aimed at gaining, maintaining and increasing influence in organizations. Successful strategies may reproduce the professional capital of the managers and experts increasing their organizational reputation, and acceptance. Both concepts have neither individually nor together, been used for the analysis of power structures of Human Resources professionals like HR managers as a social group or as a department of experts. However, we argue that they are appropriate to gain new insights into this social group, which is working under threats like rationalization, restructuring or outsourcing. Even in challenging situations of changing expectations from other intra- and extra organizational stakeholders, HR professionals seek to work under consistent conditions. They try to establish successful long-term relationships to other stakeholders in the organization, respond to role changes (Ulrich, 1996; Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Wright, 2008; Beer et al., 2015; Cleveland et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2015; Gerpott, 2015), and support a sustainable Human Resource Management system (Bailey et al., 2018; Truss et al., 2012). Next, we are going to explain the streams of our theoretical framework in more detail.

Professional Capital: The Basis for the Power Position

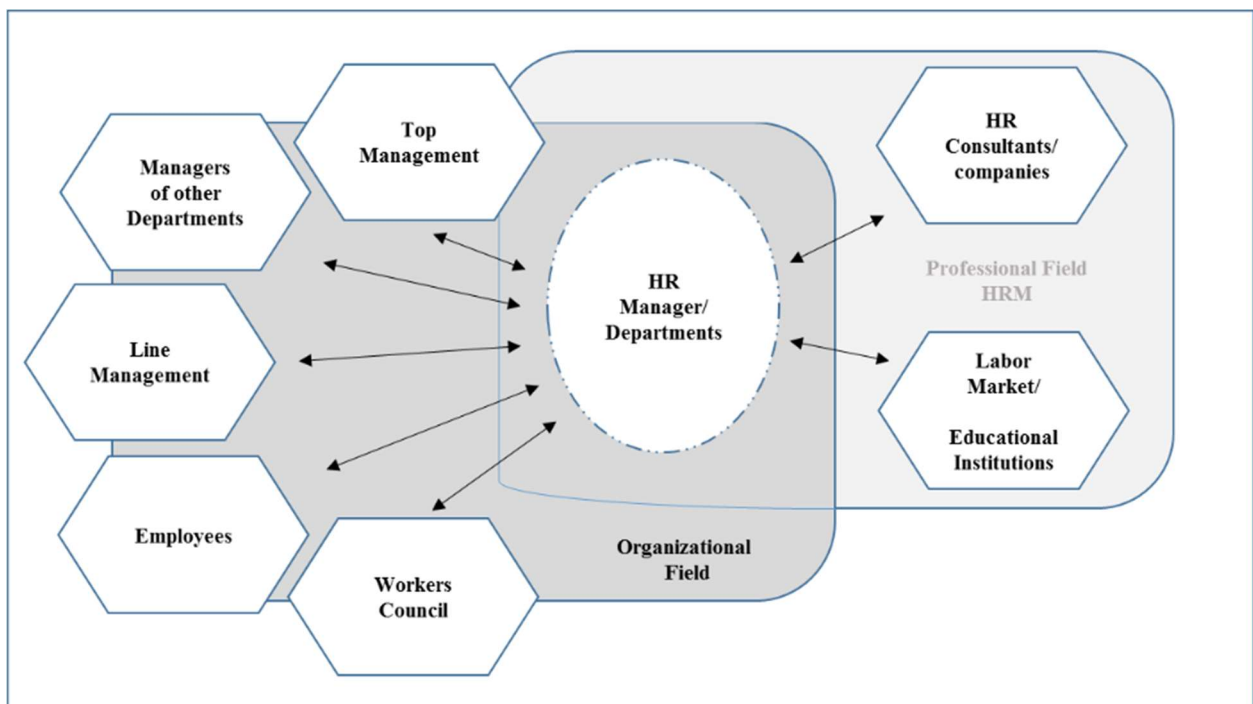
and the status of Human Resources Managers and Departments

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice offers an interesting theoretical frame for the analysis of power positions of different social groups in an organization. Bourdieu's analysis is interested in how "inter- and intra-organizational power relations are produced, reproduced, and contested" (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008: 1), and how professional attitudes and behaviours play a role in an organizational context (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011). Especially Schinkel and Noordegraaf (2011) strengthened this perspective on professions through their concept of "professional field", "professional capital", "symbolic capital" and "professional habitus". They developed appropriate categories to explain the development of a profession as a battle for power. Based on Bourdieu's concept, Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) propose an approach for the analysis of the power structures within an organization. Their focus is on: "Determining the key figures or groups in an organization and assessing the kinds of capital [...] that they possess and that appear to be at stake in their interactions". (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008: 22), as well as on power relations that are spanned between and taken on by the actors in the field.

We analyse HR managers and departments and have a look at their power positions and their relation towards other stakeholder groups within the organization. Stakeholder groups can be the top management, the line management, other departments, owners, workers councils or other forms of representatives of employees, as well as special groups of employees in an organization. However, HR managers are at the same time also part of their profession. Noordegraaf & Schinkel (2011) refer to Bourdieu but extend it to professions and professionals. They see the latter as “a well-educated and well-behaving group member” (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011: 100) following norms and rules of a specific profession that are legitimated through professional associations, a standardized education, special codes for behavioural jurisdictions. **Figure 2.1** shows the position of Human Resources Professionals and departments in the organizational as well as professional field.

**Figure 2.1**

**Positions and Relations of HRM in the Organizational and Professional Field**



Source: Authors.

Therefore, the position of a respective professional within an organization depends on:

- How other social groups perceive this profession as necessary and useful for the organization and its goals?
- Whether and what kind of professional qualities they attribute to this respective professional?

The power position of an actor in an organization can be described by the total amount and the structure of professional capital she or he possesses. The types of capital that play a role in most fields are economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu 1992). An example for economic capital is money, or more precisely for departments or social groups in organizations, the budget of each department. This economic capital at the same time symbolizes the strength of a department's position. For cultural capital, three different forms can be discerned: the "incorporated cultural capital" - which is acquired during an (in)formal education and socialization processes, the "objectified cultural capital", e.g. books on HR management, and the "institutionalized cultural capital" - e.g. titles such as an MBA). Social capital embraces the total amount of current or potential resources that are connected to a network of relations to other actors or the affiliation to a certain group (Bourdieu, 1986). Finally, a special form of capital is the "symbolic capital", which works as a kind of credit or advance, rooted in the belief of a group into those who possess it. In a wider sense, symbolic capital of HR professionals can be described as the form and amount of capital that is perceived as relevant and highly valued by other actors and thus is recognized. Overall, the amount of symbolic capital corresponds to the power of actors (Bourdieu, 2005b: 120; Bourdieu, 1984: 7f). Regarding HR managers and experts, we can assume that their development within the profession of HRM experts contributes to the acquisition of cultural and social capital. Within the organization, those actors receive "professional capital", which can be expected and accepted as symbolic capital in the organisation, determining the position of the actor in the organizational field and empowering her/ him to act advantageous in different situations (**Figure 2.1**). In addition to individual capital of HR managers, like individual professional networks, formal qualifications and incorporated management knowledge and experience, each organization provides specific professional capital to different formal posts, like the salary, the

budget of a department, job titles, networking options through the memberships to special project groups or other opportunities.

Micro-political Influence Tactics: The activities of Human Resource Managers and Experts to gain, maintain and increase Influence

The notion of micro-politics can be described as the exploitation and allocation of human resources to achieve personal goals, a personal rise within a system or the safeguard of a rule of power in combination with an improvement of the own conditions of existence (e.g. Burns, 1961; Miller, 2008; Rong & Cao, 2015). In this respect, power is relative and reciprocal to the interdependence of actors, seldom absolute, but restricted to certain actors and their traits. It includes that the actors are embedded in stable power structure that allows pre-structured, guided and limited individual political actions. Although actors themselves are influenced by individual and collective political activities. With respect to HR professionals and HR departments, activities as well as strategies of the HR professionals to improve their position within the organization are based, and at the same time limited, by already existing power structures and rules. Nevertheless, a basic assumption of micro-politics is also that individuals or groups have enough room to manoeuvre for the interpretation and pursuit of own interests. This can be an individual or a group interest. Power orientation thus has a focus on the establishment, the maintenance and the expansion of possibilities to influence individuals or groups with a focus on the available or attributed power sources and resources (e.g. Neuberger, 1995; McAllister et al., 2015; Munyon et al., 2015). In more detail, individuals or social groups can adopt various power tactics and techniques to influence organizational decisions and pursue individual plans and rational strategies using their own resources and the perceived resources of their counterparts. This can result in struggle, conflicts, change or contingency, due to the various possibilities of actions, and alternative perspectives (e.g. Fleming & Spicer, 2008; Piot et al., 2016). Usually, individuals have three possible directions of such an influence in an organization. A supervisor can influence her/his subordinates, employees in turn can try to influence their supervisors and finally, a lateral influence can take place between equivalent individuals (Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl, 2006; Chaturvedi & Srivastava, 2014). The influence of HR managers and departments to managers from other departments and work councils is mostly lateral. Moreover, upwards influence tactics are used towards top management executives. The result of an influence attempt can be either a commitment, a weaker form of compliance, or a passive or active resistance (Yukl & Falbe, 1990). We argue that strong power

positions of HR professionals and departments are positively influenced by tactics that create at least some sort of compliance, better commitment or active support of HR professionals and departments. An achieved power positions, based on resources, and successfully used strategies, constitute the foundation of the following influence processes (Yukl, 2006).

Since our focus is on the enforcement of own interests within daily work activities, we choose proactive influencing tactics as the relevant concept for our analysis (Neuberger 2006; Yukl, 2006). Neuberger also points to the tension between legitimate socio-cultural norms of behaviour and illegitimate concealed behaviours with deceptive intentions in the use of tactics. This illustrates the ambivalence between micro-criminality required as a sort of “intrapreneurship” to fill the gaps of the imperfect order in an organization (Neuberger 1995, 2006: 552f.). The Following legitimate norms may in turn lead to more sustainable and stable relationships and power positions. Depending on this concept of proactive influence tactics, scholars use different terms for a comparable list of influence tactics, partly summarized to superordinating strategies that are seen as more stable and used on a long-term result. In our analysis on micro-political influence tactics of Human Resources managers, we decided to use the set proactive influence tactics developed by Gary Yukl (2006). Proactive influence tactics show a different impact on recipients, collaborators as well as counterparts. In this direction, Lee et al. (2017: 2ff.) found that “rational persuasion”, “apprising”, “inspirational appeals”, “collaboration”, “consultation”, and “ingratiation” as well as “legitimation tactics” exert a positive influence on the relationship between the various actors involved in the process., while “personal appeals”, “exchange” and “coalition tactics” have only a moderately positive effect. Only “pressure” was found to have a negative effect (**Table 2.1**).

In line with mainly lateral or upwards oriented influence tactics of HR professional, especially soft, and rational influence tactics - like rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, apprising, collaboration, ingratiation, and consultation - contribute to positive relationship-oriented and task-related outcomes. They successfully engage in a target persons’ commitment to a certain request (e.g. Falbe & Yukl, 1992; Tepper et al., 1998; Clarke & Ward, 2006; Steensma & van Milligen, 2003; Berson & Sosik, 2007). Especially a good and long-lasting sustainable relationship to main collaborators in the organization, can contribute to strengthening the power position of HR professionals, and in reaching organizational long-term goals.

**Table 2.1**

**Micro-political Influence Tactics and their impact on Sustainable Relationships**

<b>Proactive Influence Tactics</b>	<b>Sustainability</b>
<b>Rational Persuasion:</b> The agent uses logical arguments and factual evidence to show a proposal, or request is feasible and relevant for attaining important task objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>positive task-orientation</b></li> <li>- <b>positive relationship-orientation</b></li> </ul>
<b>Apprising:</b> The agent explains how carrying out a request or supporting a proposal will benefit the target personally or help advance the target person's career.	
<b>Inspirational Appeals:</b> The agent makes an appeal to values and ideals or seeks to arouse the target person's emotions to gain commitment for a request or proposal.	
<b>Consultation:</b> The agent encourages the target to suggest improvements in a proposal or to help plan an activity or change for which the target person's support and assistance are desired.	
<b>Collaboration:</b> The agent offers to provide relevant resources and assistance if the target will carry out a request or approve a proposed change.	
<b>Ingratiation:</b> The agent uses praise and flattery before or during an influence attempt or expresses confidence in the target's ability to carry out a difficult request.	
<b>Personal Appeals:</b> The agent asks the target to carry out a request or support a proposal out of friendship or asks for a personal favour before saying what it is.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>moderately positive task-orientation</b></li> <li>- <b>moderately positive relationship-orientation</b></li> </ul>
<b>Exchange:</b> The agent offers an incentive, suggests an exchange of favours, or indicates willingness to reciprocate later if the target will do what the agent requests.	
<b>Coalition:</b> The agent seeks the aid of others to persuade the target to do something or uses the support of others as a reason for the target to agree.	
<b>Legitimizing:</b> The agent seeks to establish the legitimacy of a request or to verify authority to make it by referring to rules, policies, contracts, or precedent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>negative task-orientation</b></li> <li>- <b>positive relationship-orientation</b></li> </ul>
<b>Pressure:</b> The agent uses demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders to influence the target to carry out a request.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>negative task-orientation</b></li> <li>- <b>negative relationship-orientation</b></li> </ul>

Source: Yukl (2006: 23) and Lee et al. (2017: 224).

Sustainable Human Resource Management:

HR Roles, Role Changes and Expectations towards the daily work of HR Professionals

The daily work of HR professionals is often described by HR role models. They address expectations of internal and external actors and social groups towards the aims, focus and the activities of HR professionals, managers and experts and their departments. **Table 2.2** shows the four most influential role models for HRM, which have often been developed with respect to one another. Therefore, they share many similar roles for HR professionals and departments, which address the co-operation with different partners in the organization.

**Table 2.2**  
**Roles of Human Resources Managers in selected Role Models**

Focus social groups	Storey (1992)	Ulrich (1996)	Caldwell (2003)	Ulrich/ Brockbank (2005)
Top Management	Advisor	Strategic partner	Advisor	Strategic partner
Line Manager	Handmaid	Administrative expert	Service provider	Functional expert
Top Management/ Line Manager	Change maker	Change agent	Change agent	Human capital developer
Employees and their Representatives	Regulator	Employee Champion	Regulator	Employee advocate
All actors				HR Leaders

**Source: Authors.**

Although the models are based on theoretical taxonomies like Storey's (1994) distinction between strategic and tactical as well as interventionist and non-interventionist role, they have all been used for empirical studies as well, who are mainly interested in role changes (Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich et al., 2013). The scholarly discussion and the findings from professional practice about HR role conclude that:

- The described roles occur in practice usually in the form of role combinations whereby "role taking and role making" can be analysed through typical patterns of daily activities and their importance (e.g. Storey, 1994; Ulrich, 1996; Caldwell, 2003)
- The role expectations are fundamentally conflicting, stressful (e.g. Caldwell, 2003; Roche & Teague, 2012; Sheehan et al., 2014; Marchington, 2015), or the expression of fundamental organizational paradoxes (e.g. Gerpott, 2015; Kegan et al., 2018)

- The typical role conflicts or paradoxes are:
  - Between roles as “employee advocate” on the one hand, and substitute of the management (ward of managers) on the other hand (e.g. Gerpott, 2015: 218), or
  - Between the role of “business partner” and “internal consultant” on one hand, and “intermediary of the social relations” (steward of social contract) on the other hand (Kochan, 2004; Wright, 2008; Marchington, 2015)
- The roles are constantly changing with increasing role expectations and activities of HR manager towards business partners, advisors to the top management, or a strategic actor in the process of change, often called “new roles of HRM” (e.g. Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich et al., 2013)
- The traditional role of an “employee attorney,” who is seen as an intermediary between employees and employee representatives, clearly loses its importance (e.g. Keegan/Francis, 2010: 891): “erosion of the role”; Gerpott, 2015).

The mentioned development is subject to criticism by numerous authors with respect to its potential consequences for the professional identity of HR managers and the development of the company (e.g. Wright, 2008; Gerpott, 2015; Cohen, 2015; Marchington, 2015). Ulrich (1996) stated that the introduction of business partner models leads to an alienation of employees from the management as well as from HR management, but new role expectations towards HR professionals “[...] can both, represent employee needs and implement management agendas” (1997: 45). At the same time, the idea of “Sustainable Human Resources Management” can be understood as a further development of strategic human resources management patterns and planned HRM activities with an intension to achieve organizational long-term goals (Bailey et al., 2018; Truss et al., 2012). Short-term goals are more performance oriented. Long-term goals consider the individual wellbeing and have a societal impact (Beer et al., 2015; Legge, 2005). Nevertheless, sustainable HRM supports a more people-oriented way of thinking in the organization, puts people back in the centre of interest and includes internal and external stakeholders (Cleveland et al., 2015; Voegtlin et al., 2012; Gond et al., 2011). Sustainable HRM system make recommendations on how to overcome the weaknesses

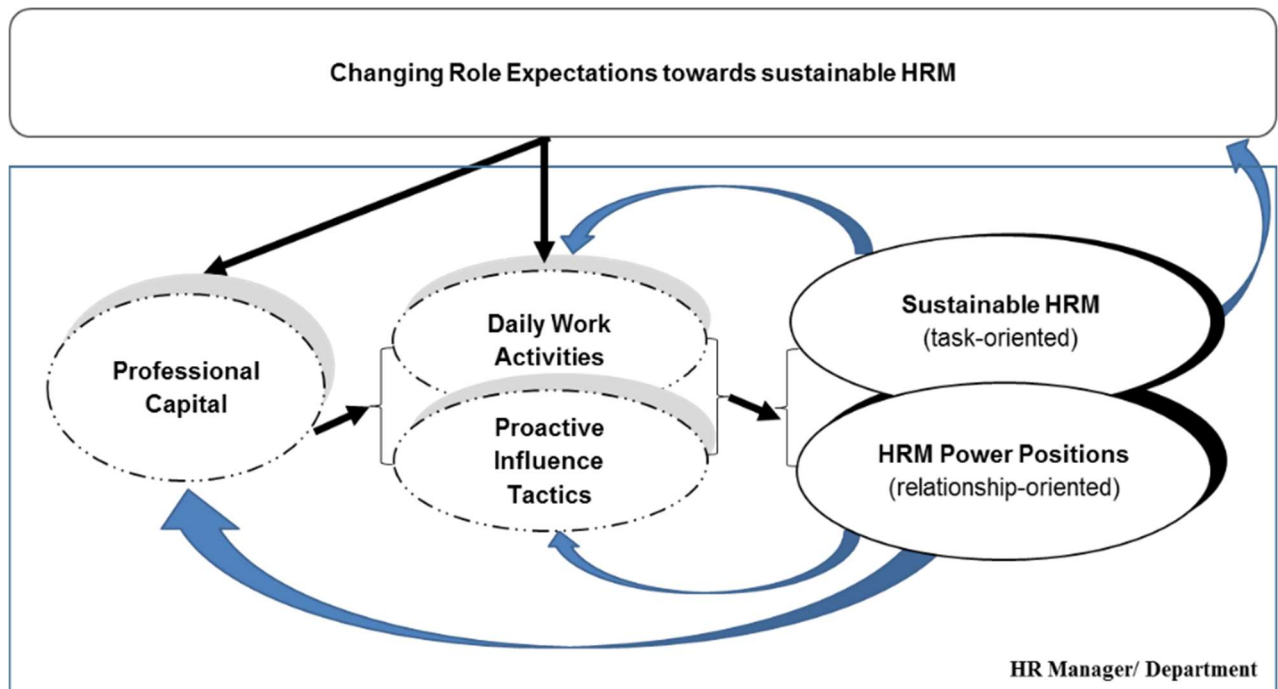
of soft human resources management attempts. They provide an understanding of the relationship that exists between HRM and business, give an inside into the influence factors of other stakeholder groups inside and outside the organization and acknowledge the ambiguous demands and tensions other stakeholders put on HRM professionals and their outcomes (Aust et al., 2015). Consequently, “Sustainable Human Resource Management,” asks for a successful combination and handling of the conflicting tactical and strategic roles, of the roles of an employee advocate and those of an HR expert, business partner and strategist. This strategic role orientation must be accompanied at the political level by sustainable, micro-political, proactive influence tactics to build long-term and stable relationships to main collaborators in and outside the organization.

#### Frame of reference of the study

The integration of three streams of literature in our theoretical foundation shows, that the power position of HR professionals and HR departments within the organization can be described by the professional capital of the actors, and its recognition through other stakeholder groups within the organization (symbolic professional capital). Their professional capital is the basis of their actions, independently of its recognition by others, but the latter is important for the acceptance and the valuation of HR professionals and departments. During their activities, HRM professionals need to consider and to respond adequately to the changing, and contradictory, role expectations from the other internal and external stakeholders. One of the main challenges seems to be the creation of sustainable HRM systems that addresses employee’s individual and social needs, and long-term organizational goals. These expectations are important antecedents with an influence on capital, strategies and tactics of HR professionals and departments. Based on their professional capital, HR managers develop different strategies in their daily work that address these role expectations and use proactive micro-political influence tactics to maintain and increase their own power positions in rivalry to other professionals of different levels in the organization. One important strategic goal can be to create a sustainable HRM system that combines a people focus with long-term organizations goals. For this purpose, HR professionals use socially sustainable micro-political tactics, like networking or collaboration to establish stable relationships to other important actors in the field. The design in **Figure 2.2** shows the link between professional capital, role expectations, micro-political influence, and power positions of Human Resource Professionals.

**Figure 2.2**

**Frame of Reference of the Study**



**Source: Authors.**

In our empirical study, we will focus on the following aspects of the above framework:

- The professional capital and power position of HR departments and the on which the position is based on
- The role patterns of the daily activities of HR departments and how they address different role expectations as well as a focus in role taking and making, role change and patterns of sustainability
- The micro-political influence tactics of HR managers and departments aimed at gaining and increasing a sustainable influence within the organization

**Empirical Study: Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis**

Our qualitative empirical study is based on the analysis of three interviews series with German HR managers in middle-sized and large cooperation's from 2003 – 2013 (**Table 2.3**).

**Table 2.3**  
**Overview of the Studies Involved**

<b>Survey</b>	<b>Professionalization of HRM (2002)</b>	<b>Dick (2010)</b>	<b>Langstrof (2013)</b>
<b>Period</b>	2002-2003	2009-2010	2013
<b>Focus</b>	changes in human resources and careers of HR managers	changes in tasks and working methods in the economic crisis	professionalization in the human resources of SMEs
<b>Size</b>	medium-sized companies (260 to 2,000 employees)	medium & large companies (700 to 21,000 employees)	medium-sized companies (100 to 5,000 employees)
<b>Industry</b>	car suppliers, trade, energy, communications services	IT, software, telecommunications, electronics, household goods, energy, car, aviation, construction, chemical, pharmaceutical, banking and finance, public administration	energy, logistics, retail, mechanical engineering, waste management, banking and finance, public administration
<b>People</b>	HR managers of the company or branch	predominantly directors or heads of HRM or head of personnel development	HR managers
<b>Number</b>	7	21	11
<b>Interviews</b>	Case 1_1 to 1_7	Case 2_1 to 2_21	Case 3_1 to 3_11

**Source: Authors.**

At the beginning, the managers described the current situation of their organizations, like structure, tasks, instruments, as well as the co-operation of HRM with other actors in the organization. Additionally, the interviewees were asked to describe relevant changes in their tasks, structures, and position. Finally, we also asked for their professional career towards their current position. The interviews were performed in the office of the interviewees and lasted

between 30 and 150 minutes. For a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Hammersley, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 1996) of interviews with HR managers, we followed Alvesson and Kärreman's guidelines (2000) and looked at text passages about the positions of their HR departments and their understanding of roles and about professional and tactical activities to gain and to increase influence in the organization. We started with explicit working definitions of the central categories, professional capital, HR role expectations and micro-political influence tactics accordance based on our literature and developed coding rules for the interview material (Table 2.4).

**Table 2.4**  
**Guiding Categories of the Analysis and their Definitions**

<b>Main Categories</b>	<b>Definitions and Coding Rules</b>	<b>Illustrating Example</b>
<b>Role patterns in daily activities of HR professionals/ departments</b>	Statements about HRM activities with direct or indirect references to the typical roles of HRM, namely strategic partner, personnel expert, employee advocate, service provider, business partner of line management, or change agent	Codes examples for strategic partner role, and change agent role "Before my time, the HR manager was not a member of the top management, today I'm sitting here. It is, of course, the case that we have to go through the main objectives, which can also be found in a personnel department." (Case 3_3, Waste Management) "Then we have a very wide change management area in which we support any kind of change processes on request from the specialist areas (...) In fact, we accompany the entire process of change conceptually in implementation." (Interview 2_21, Energy Sector)
<b>Professional capital of HR professionals/ departments</b>	This means the acquired capital available to the individual person or a close group of persons characterizing the person or group her/ him as a HR professional. Professional capital can occur in different forms (e.g. diverse sub-forms of cultural capital, social capital, or economic capital).	„At heart, you need the ability to talk in a targeted way to totally different persons in different situations, and in a way that our bridges are not burned behind ourselves, but you may come back." (Interview 2_15, HRM Business partner, Banking and Finance)

<b>Micro-political influence tactics of HR professionals</b>	Statements that refer to influence tactics of HR professionals in daily work through which the position of HRM in the organization is maintained, extended, or planned to do so. <b>Examples:</b> rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, exchange, pressure, ingratiation, collaboration, consultation, coalition, networking, legitimation	Code example for Consultation and Networking “(…) it is increasingly implemented that HRM performs as consultant of the top management representatives (…) HRM gets also increasingly proactive there, in the sense of an implicit strategy.” (Interview 2_1, Head HR development, IT-consulting)
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**Source: Authors.**

Finally, we summarized the codes for each of the categories. Our sample does only allow an analysis from the perspective of the HR managers as HR professionals. However, the interviewees often refer to their staff members, the HR experts, and their departments. With respect to professional capital, and the fulfilment of role expectations by other groups of actors, we also must rely on self-descriptions, although we can conclude from described results of HR work in the interview texts. In the further analysis, we especially put attention on those characteristics of the daily working patterns, of professional capital, and influence tactics who were characterized in the literature as building sustainable relations with other actors.

## **Main Results**

### Professional capital of German HR managers and departments

The perceived professional capital of German HR managers and their departments consists of special knowledge about the HR issues and tools as well as knowledge about HR core processes of a special organization. HR managers possess a high potential for empathy, communication and negotiation skills, many contacts and networks of relationships, problem-solving competencies, and the ability to manage the own expertise as well as the own service orientation. Our examples illustrate some of these aspects. Certainly, all interview partners put an emphasis on specialized HR knowledge. We found many companies that especially organize, manage, and develop this knowledge through external and internal training. This includes knowledge about the organization as well as about the core business of the departments that an HR professional oversees. This is the sort of professional capital that is recognized by line managers and top management and thus serves as symbolic capital:

„HR professionals have indeed a broad knowledge of the firm’s core business ... We really try to stay up to date and act very well in our division. [...]. In the meantime, all personnel staff is people with an academic degree and professional experience. They are remarkably better educated, and all know other firms from the inside as well. This increases their recognition as well. That is a fact.“ (Case 2\_6, Pharmaceutical Industry).

The quotation shows that a combination of HR expert knowledge and knowledge of the core business may strengthen the position of the HR professionals. The latter can also be developed through close cooperation with the other departments with the role of a HR service provider.

„[...] we are very well informed [...] as internal service provider we are aware; we know the developments and the special challenges.“ (Case 2\_21, Energy sector).

Moreover, a central part of the professional capital of HR managers is the ability to communicate and negotiate with various social groups in and outside the organization.

„At heart, you need the ability to talk in a targeted way to totally different persons in different situations, and in a way that the bridges are not burned behind you, and you may come back.“ (Case 2\_15, Banking and Finance)

„Our strength is the local implementation, to bring the others as co-workers into the boat, to create a joint understanding of newly established structures and instruments and so forth.“ (Case 2\_21, Energy sector)

The above-mentioned competencies are gained through and based upon intense contacts and networks of relationships. The interviewees mentioned that their HR officers “[...] are spending at least 80% of their working time together with their costumers (in the line)” (Case 2\_21, Energy sector), have regularly direct talks managers, including senior managers and top management (Case2\_9, Energy sector), and/or have contacts to HR managers from other firms (e.g., Case 1\_1, Car supplier). As result, HR professionals often refer to their relationship management as a central professional competence:

„Relationship management is very well organized with us [...] we do have efficient processes there [...] is one of our strengths.” (Case 2\_6, Pharmaceutical Industry)

Other important aspects of the professional capital are a high potential for empathy, and a problem-solving orientation and competence to solve conflicts.

„Well, I think, a high potential for empathy is important. [...] One must work in a solution-oriented way [...] and a respective behaviour, for example in situations of conflict, is also needed.” (Case 1\_7, Communication services)

„I think a certain amount of empathy should be there, because as a HR person you should have it. The ability to enter the role of the other.” (Case 3\_7, Energy)

Moreover, problem-solving competencies, and service orientation are important parts of the professional capital by the interviewed managers. Finally, the HR managers in our sample put an emphasis on abilities to manage their own expertise:

„We started to train ourselves and create a basic structure and instruments for that purpose, so that we can solve all routine tasks by ourselves having an incredibly good knowledge there [...] and not how to react.” (Case 1\_7, Communication service)

Although we need to rely on the perception of the interviewed HR managers, they often also refer to the acceptance of their professional competencies in the sense of symbolic capital. It shows that many characteristics of the professional capital are widely accepted by the other social groups like top managers, line managers, employees, or members of the workers representatives. The following quotes are examples:

„On the other hand, it is increasingly realized and accepted, that HRM works as a consultant of the top management.” (Case 2\_1, IT Consulting)

„These departments want us as business partners to be there, even if ... around 90% are without a relevance for HR. Nevertheless, in 10 % of the topics, HR knowledge is needed. Here, the integration of the (HR) Business partner is relatively essential.”

(Case 2\_10, Telecommunication).

Role patterns in daily activities of HR professionals/ departments

The empirical analysis revealed various references to the central roles of HR managers across industries and according to the difference in company size. It was clear that HR managers were aware of the different roles as well as their role conflicts, explaining the differences and often-contradictory expectations towards HR professionals:

„Sometimes, we must negotiate with employees' and representatives against our own interests. Then you are sometimes in a sandwich position." (Case 3\_7, Energy Sector)

„The HR policy is decided by our top management. We have a different opinion on this, but this is the position of top management. For example, the management also carries out negotiations with the workers council. We then typically hear from the works council what happens there. I think this is wrong, but it is lived like that."

(Case 2\_6, Pharmaceutical Industry)

Other statements like the following adds the notion that the respective collaborators recognize the role of HR departments as a business partner:

„These are really the essential elements, that there are conflicts [...], but if you have a business-partner relationship with one another, it is also considered by the others. This is a mutual giving and taking." (Case 2\_14, Chemical Industry)

Finally, a few HR managers reject the traditional role of employee advocates:

„So, the HR staff must also be able to enter the business areas which will be important. [...] We are not intermediaries between executives and employees. This is the responsibility of the workers council. We clearly represent the employer position. This has changed

considerably. Sometimes you have to remind your own department staff on this again."

(Case 3\_6, Logistics Industry)

In our material, the traditional role of an employee's representative as well as the more recent role of the strategic business partner of the top management were most frequently addressed (by 34% of each coded role references). The role of an HR expert respective an HR service provider makes 23% and 9% of the total accounts to personnel management roles. Furthermore, we found combinations traditional roles as well as new roles. The following quotations illustrate certain facets of the activity and role descriptions of HR managers:

Employee representative: "... try to support him in his development"

„The employee also always has the opportunity to simply go to HR and say whatever he wants [...] If we are signed to an employee whom we consider valuable that who does not advance with his boss, we are secretive as HR and try to support him in his development."

(Case 2\_5, Chemical industry)

Our results show that German HR professionals are aware of their responsibility for the employees as a central part of their professional identity. This also includes their perception of workers councils as important partners as well as critical comments on the top management.

Strategic consultant: "... today I am sitting here"

„Before my time, the HR manager was not a member of the top management team, today I am sitting here. It is, of course, the case that we have to go through the main objectives, which can also be found in a personnel department." (Case 3\_3, Waste Management)

The quotation shows that the role of a strategic consultant of the top management has gained importance during the last years. The participation of HR managers in top management decisions also helps to put HR objectives to the forefront. As a result, to be a part of the top management (symbolic capital) strengthens the power position of the HR departments in the organization.

Personnel expert and service provider: "We try to shape this in a needs-oriented way"

„Now we have a training catalogue, which is launched every year, and we have a lot of encouragement for it. The topics are presented in a company-specific manner in coordination with different departments. [...] and now we give the feedback and ask: `What do you like? What is missing? And try to make it more needs oriented.'" (Case 3\_7, Energy Sector)

The role of a personnel expert as a further traditional role of HR experts also seems to be still of importance. References to the role were found in nearly all organizations. However, within this role, a shift towards an understanding as service provider (“need-oriented”) was found as some of the references indicate. Fulfilling these roles may support the attribution of professional symbolic capital to HR experts through the receivers of such services like line managers, or employees.

Expert for change: "... has to plan much more ahead"

„Then we have a very wide change management area in which we support any kind of change processes on request from the specialist areas. [...] In fact, we accompany the entire process of change conceptually in implementation. Our strengths lie in the implementation on site, to bring employees into the boat, to establish a common orientation in the newly established areas and so on." (Case 2\_21, Energy Sector)

References towards the role of a change agent was found in at least a few, often-larger organizations. The top management may welcome this role but as the quote indicates, by line managers undergoing change processes. The material shows that German HR managers perceive themselves to a considerable extent as people experts and employee advocates. Only a very few HR professionals departed from this position. At the same time, we found proof for role changes towards the role as a strategic consultant and a HR service provider and, at least, for larger organizations, towards the role as a change agent. The combination of these contradictory role enactments in the daily HR work seems to fit with expectations of sustainable HRM systems, although the interviewed HR professionals did not refer to this concept.

Micro-political influence tactics of German HR professionals

We found a preference for the use of soft influence tactics like collaboration, consultation, coalition, and networking, which is obviously related to the more dominant lateral or upwards influence of HR activities. In addition, exchange, rational persuasion, pressure and legitimation tactics were found. Typical references to collaboration, consultation respective networking as influence strategies include:

„[...] HRM works as a consultant of the top management representatives [...] getting increasingly proactive there, in the sense of an implicit strategy.” (Case 2\_1, IT Consulting)

„Let’s put it like this, we try to play a mediating role, to include the interests of all parties, to include them, and to find a way everybody can live with.” (Case 3\_3, Waste Management)

With the use of rational persuasion as an important tactic, HR managers demonstrate their cultural capital like professional knowledge. Nevertheless, this tactic also points to the contributions of HR activities to long-term sustainable organizational HRM goals.

„This topic must be placed in a way to show that we are able to create added value, which works better through long-term HR recruitment and HR retention. This is a good lever.”  
(Case 2\_13, Construction industry)

Many HR professionals referred to exchange tactics, as equivalent information exchange based on specific knowledge about the employees, or as reciprocal exchange of contributions to a common goal. The HR professional tried to establish stable exchange patterns, which also, at least, maintained or stabilized their position towards the exchange partner.

„Well, we try to come to a reciprocal accommodation, to solve problems with the axe does not make sense. “ (Case 1\_7, Communication Services)

„[...] but if you have a business-partner relationship with each other, this is also considered by the others. This is a reciprocal giving and taking. “ (Case 2\_14, Chemical Industry)

We also found several interesting examples for the use of pressure tactics. Interesting is, that the influence of pressure is often combined with an already established power position, from which the interviewed HR managers expect a further increase of their influence. This is displayed in quotations, where managers claim that they see their trainings as “obligatory,” or that they “want” their top management team member to act “powerfully” for HR issues.

„There are trainings, which we see as obligatory, especially in the management area, where we say that a certain group of managers have to have that kind of training.”

(Case 2\_7, Software development)

„He is member of the top management, which I see as an ideal precondition [...]. If you have someone in the superstructure who can powerfully act within the top management and the decision board. That is where we want to go.” (Case 2\_2, Telecommunication)

Legitimations tactics also play a role in influencing other social groups within the organization. In the following quotations, the HR managers legitimize their HR structure with a reference to the fashionable business partner model of Dave Ulrich. Even the titles or names of the departments are claiming excellence in HR work, as the critical remark in the second quotations shows. It remains open, whether this is accepted by business partners and can result in an increased symbolic capital.

„We are organized according to Dave Ulrich. We do have three departments here, two as so-called Centres of Excellence, where there are specialists for Compensation & Benefits, HR and management development, HR-Controlling and so forth.”

(Case 2-20 Banking and Finance)

„What is referred to as the `business partner` is often only a renaming of the classical personal referent [...].” (Case 2\_10 Telecommunication)

Even if the business partner model is more a “talk” than real “in action,” the references of the interviewed managers show the strong influence of perceived expectations towards their work. Finally, we also found a few influence tactics beyond the model by Yukl like persistence:

„We did those over years giving respective feedback. Then, we included (the issue) into leadership training and asked for it repeatedly. Such things did not work in short terms in our company.” (Case 2\_12, Public Administration)

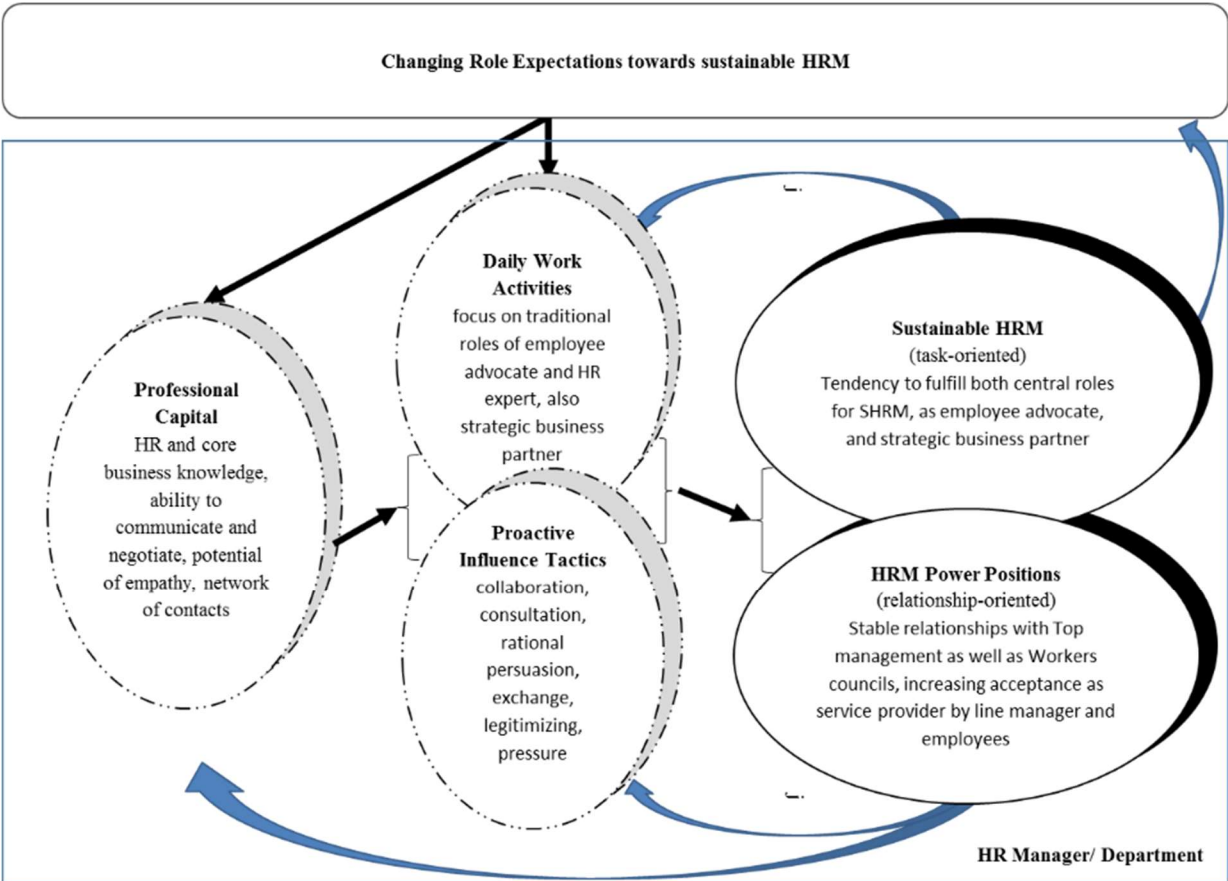
Since the use of influence tactics is normally characterized by combinations of preferred tactics, we also looked at such typical patterns of tactics. We identified a combination of the predominantly soft and rational influence tactics: collaboration, consultation, rational persuasion, coalition or legitimation, which are likely to have a positive or moderately positive effect on the relationship to other individuals or groups. The research indicated that the tactics were effective in establishing, maintaining, and developing socially sustainable relationships with other stakeholder groups. This supported the development of a sustainable HRM system and the advancement of their power positions. Even pressure tactics, when used in combination with other tactics, seemed to be effective means for increasing the power position of HRM.

### **Summary and Discussion**

The goal of our study was to investigate the main characteristics of professional capital, the patterns of daily work activities, and the micro-political proactive influence tactics of German Human Resources managers. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon studies, our study reveals, that the role patterns of German Human Resources Managers have not yet fundamentally changed. To a large extent, German HRM professionals still identify themselves with the role of “HR expert” and an “employee advocate.” Nevertheless, our study also shows some changes in the adoption of new HR roles like the “strategic consultant” and the “business partner” with a strategic mentality. To maintain and improve their positions in the organization, HR managers strive to successfully combine the traditional roles with the new roles. These changes are also displayed in their self-perceived professional capital, where the managers perceive “core business knowledge” and experience as well as “HR expertise” as important characteristics. They claim to build on their “abilities to communicate and negotiate,” their “empathy”, as well as their “network of contacts”. The latter is in line with the use of the sustainable micro-political influence tactics where we found. “Collaboration,” “consultation”, “rational persuasion”, “coalition” and “legitimation” are the preferred tactics used, aimed at establishing a socially sustainable relationship to the collaborators, and reaching HR as well as organizational goals. The following **Figure 2.3** summarizes the main findings of our empirical study with respect to self-perceived professional capital characteristics, main role enactments, and proactive

influence tactics. The results also indicate some task- and relation-oriented outcomes of the HR work and influence attempts as perceived by the managers, although this must be researched more in-depth by asking other groups of actors.

**Figure 2.3**  
**Main Findings**



Source: Authors.

Overall, our results shed a light on the specific situation in Germany, with a strong tradition in regulated relationships between employees and management, where HR managers play a substantial role in connecting top managements` organizational goals and interests with the individual and group interests of employees, including the workers representatives like work councils. The results with a still important part of HR work devoted to employee issues or relationships to workers representatives shows clear differences to the findings of Ulrich and colleagues (2013). The main group of HR managers was also found to be quite sensitive for the role conflicts between the roles of an employee advocate, and a strategic service partner for the line and the top management (e.g. Wright, 2008; Marchington, 2015; Gerpott, 2015), trying to balance both groups of roles. To also successfully adopt these new roles, the HR managers

mainly used soft influence tactics to build and re-arrange their interpersonal relationships to top management executives, and other managers, in line with the findings of Lee et al. (2017). The patterns of a sustainable Human resource management (e.g., Diaz-Carrion et al. (2018); Ehnert et al., 2016) were expressed as an in-built into the professional capital in form of a double orientation towards core business and a results orientation as well as HR in our material. The activity focus was on the employee advocate and the strategic business partner role, and finally in form of socially sustainable influence tactics. As a result, we conclude, that German HR managers, with a focus on both, employee issue and long-term organizational goals, seem to be well prepared for building a sustainable HRM system.

### **Contributions, Limitations, and Implications for further research**

Our study contributes to the scientific discussion on the HR work activities, and the power position of HR professionals and department as follows: Firstly, we respond to rather under-theorized studies by proposing a new theoretical framework based on Bourdieu's concept of professional capital, which we combine with the micro-political approach of proactive influence tactics. We argue that, through the integration of a meso-level perspective and a micro-level approach, we can investigate and understand the organizational effects of individual behaviours of Human Resources Managers in Germany. Secondly, our contribution adds to the rather large body of Anglo-Saxon empirical studies on the work activities and power position of HR professionals a study, rooted in a German context. Moreover, the study is based on a unique database of interviews with HR managers, which covers 10 years of Human Resources Management experience in Germany. Thirdly, the results, despite their inherent limitations, offer compelling insights into the daily work of HR managers and their pursuit of professional recognition. Fourthly, and moreover, we add the focus on sustainable Human resource management to our analysis by looking especially for sustainable capital and activity patterns, as well as socially sustainable influence tactics of HR managers. Beyond the above-mentioned contributions of our study, we also see some deficits and shortcomings. Although our theoretical framework is helpful to understand important task-related, social, and political aspects of the situation of HR professionals, there is a need to better integrate the theoretical concepts and deeper analyse the relation between role expectations, daily activities, professional capital and sustainable micro-political influence tactics, and its outcomes. Moreover, the results of our empirical study further show indications for other influence tactics that were not included in the concept provided by Yukl (2006). We argue that the list from Yukl

can be further extended through political tactics like “persistence” “networking” or “self-promotion.” Another shortcoming of the study is the focus of the sample on HR managers, and their view towards HRM activities and problems. Our study predominantly analyses overall references to tactics, and only partly the perceived outcome of an influence tactic or the social groups addressed by each tactic. Moreover, we have not looked for any context factors like branch or size of the organization, periods, and characteristics of the HR managers. Although the focus on managers delivers a probably one-sided perspective on the state and changes in HR profession in organizations, it can be the starting point for more detailed and multi-level, and multi-actor case studies that addresses the mentioned limitations of our approach.

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## Chapter 3

### Ambidexterity and Sustainable Leadership in Organisational Contexts

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#### Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face unique challenges in managing conflicting demands while striving for long-term sustainability. This study explores the role of ambidextrous leadership in fostering sustainable practices within SMEs, addressing a gap in existing literature. Employing a comparative case study design, data was collected from two SMEs representing contrasting organizational cultures. Analysis revealed distinct leadership approaches and organizational contexts. In one case, a familial culture facilitated open leadership activities, while in the other, a focus on innovation led to top-down control. Both cases demonstrated efforts towards what we call 'Nonexploitative Exploitation,' balancing control and autonomy to promote long-term orientation. The findings underscore the importance of organizational culture in shaping leadership behaviours and driving sustainable outcomes. While familial cultures foster employee loyalty, they hinder adaptability, whereas innovation-focused cultures drive competitiveness but risk employee dissatisfaction. This study contributes via insights into reconciling conflicting demands for exploration and exploitation, empowering SMEs to cultivate supportive environments aligned with long-term objectives, bridging sustainable leadership and ambidexterity.

**Keywords:** Ambidextrous leadership, Sustainable leadership, Small and medium-sized enterprises

## **Sustainable Leadership Activities in SMEs: Can Non-Exploitative Exploitation Support Long-Term Orientation?**

### **Introduction**

For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), long-term survival is a critical issue and often requires managing conflicting demands (Franco & Haase, 2010; Garcia et al., 2022; Verbano & Venturini, 2013). Most importantly, SMEs face challenges due to their often-discussed limited resources (De Clercq et al., 2014; Lubatkin et al., 2006; Wenke et al., 2021). It can be argued that managing such conflicting demands and achieving long-term economic sustainability regardless is the goal of sustainable leadership activities (Assoratgoon & Kantabura, 2023, Lee et al., 2023, Odegbesan et al., 2023). SMEs do already address the issues related to sustainable leadership. Firstly, the concept of business sustainability, which at times encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions, necessitates SMEs to balance multiple priorities while ensuring long-term viability (Al-Shaikh & Hanaysha, 2023). Especially financial and human capital can be considered barriers to such strategic goals, which hinder their ability to invest adequately in sustainability initiatives (Shields & Shelleman, 2020). Additionally, cultural factors play a significant role in shaping SMEs' approach towards sustainability. Regional and geographic cultural antecedents influence owner-managers' attitudes and behaviours regarding sustainability, with some SMEs exhibiting a strong moral identity rooted in community responsibility and trust (Kraus et al., 2020). For the study at hand, however, sustainability needs to be focused on issues related to 'business sustainability', as elaborated and understood by Al-Shaikh and Hanaysha (2023, p. 1), in terms of "implementing best practices and approaches for dealing with social, environmental, and economic aspects to ensure business development". For SMEs specifically, this perspective has been addressed so far by various approaches. For example, research by Franco and Matos (2015) highlights the diverse leadership styles present in SMEs, with no single style dominating consistently. Transformational leadership, defined as a style of leadership that inspires and motivates employees to pursue a shared vision, has been demonstrated to be particularly beneficial in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This is because transformational leadership emphasises intrinsic motivation and individualised consideration, which are particularly conducive to the success of SMEs. However, the effectiveness of leadership styles varies based on factors such as the SME's operating environment, sector, and geographical region. For instance, while transformational leadership may enhance performance in dynamic settings,

transactional leadership might be more suitable for routine-based tasks in less dynamic environments (Franco & Matos, 2015). Moreover, Nguyen et al. (2021) emphasize the critical role of entrepreneurial leadership in driving SME performance. Entrepreneurial leadership fosters entrepreneurial orientation within SMEs, leading to increased organizational innovation and dynamic capabilities. However, the effectiveness of entrepreneurial leadership hinges on mediating factors such as team creativity, competitive advantage, and technological innovation capability. These factors serve as conduits through which entrepreneurial leadership influences SME performance, highlighting the difficult interplay between leadership styles and organizational dynamics. Viana Feranita et al. (2020), on the other hand, underscore the significance of leadership style in promoting innovation within SMEs. Transformational leadership emerges as a key driver of innovation and performance, surpassing the impact of transactional leadership. Transformational leaders inspire innovation through visionary leadership and individualized consideration, thereby enhancing SMEs' adaptability and competitiveness. Although transactional leadership is positively associated with innovation, it exerts a lesser effect on the performance of SMEs. However, it does exert an indirect influence on performance through innovation mediators. An interesting perspective that has appeared in recent research, although still scarcely researched, is the concept of ambidextrous leadership in SMEs. Research by Busola Oluwafemi et al. (2020) highlights the importance of ambidextrous leadership in SMEs for fostering both explorative and exploitative innovation behaviours. According to this work, leaders who demonstrate openness in their leadership behaviour create an environment conducive to creativity and learning, fostering explorative innovation. Conversely, leaders employing closeness in their leadership behaviour direct followers towards goal accomplishment, encouraging exploitative innovation. In the context of Qatar, Al-Eida (2020) explores the impact of ambidextrous leadership on organizational excellence in SMEs. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for SMEs, necessitating innovative approaches to leadership. Atiku and Randa (2021) emphasize the role of ambidextrous leadership in sustaining SMEs post-pandemic, particularly in promoting workforce creativity, continuous improvement, and resource efficiency.

Despite these advancements, a gap remains in understanding how ambidextrous leadership contributes to sustainable leadership practices in SMEs, particularly in managing conflicting demands and supporting long-term orientation. By addressing this gap, this study can provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which ambidextrous leadership fosters

sustainable leadership practices in SMEs, ultimately enhancing their long-term viability and success (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Lang & Keuscher, 2020).

The research methodology employed in this study embraces a comparative case study design. This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration and comparison of two distinct cases, offering a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. By meticulously selecting these cases, the study aims to capture diverse perspectives and experiences. Data collection methods include expert interviews with entire management teams, daily self-reflections, and semi-structured interviews, ensuring a thorough exploration of leadership behaviours and organizational dynamics. The main contribution of the article lies in its exploration of the connection between sustainable leadership and ambidexterity within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as evidenced by the analysis of two contrasting cases.

### **Sustainable leadership and ambidexterity**

The imperative of sustainable leadership in SMEs lies in its capacity to navigate these challenges while steering the organization towards long-term economic sustainability (Assoratgoon & Kantabutra, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Liao, 2022; Odegbesan et al., 2023). It can be observed from further studies that in this particular field of interest, especially for SMEs, a main concern is the management of exploitation and exploration – two key elements of ambidextrous leadership (Ansah et al., 2021; He & Wong, 2004; Garretsen et al., 2020; Poon & Mohamad, 2020; Zacher & Rosing, 2015; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Turner et al., 2013). Moreover, previous studies have highlighted the importance of balancing exploitation and exploration (Jansen et al., 2009; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). In contrast, some scholars wonder whether exploitation or exploration are more beneficial than ambidexterity and are left questioning if SMEs should focus more on either one of them or perhaps switch between these two (Samimi et al., 2022; Kang & Kim, 2020). The most recent studies explicitly addressing the aim for sustainable leadership in SMEs in terms of an ambidextrous leadership understanding also look at the multifaceted challenges that SMEs face and that could jeopardize their sustainability daily. One crucial strategy for overcoming these challenges is through strategic alliances. Russo and Schena (2021) explore the innovative concept of ambidexterity within the context of SME alliances, aiming to address the exploration-exploitation dilemma for enhanced financial performance. In the manufacturing sector, Hossain et al. (2023) emphasize the necessity for SMEs to adopt Industry 4.0 technologies and complex leadership approaches to attain sustainability. Their study reveals

that organizational ambidexterity mediates the relationship between these factors, while strategic flexibility moderates their effects. Finally, Malik et al. (2024) investigate the relationship between ambidextrous leadership style and human resource management (HRM) practices in knowledge-intensive SMEs. Their findings emphasize the positive impact of ambidextrous leadership on creating a culture conducive to innovation, trust, and employee empowerment, thus enhancing strategic agility and organizational outcomes. Furthermore, sustainable leadership in SMEs has its roots in foundational concepts such as Rhineland leadership, which champions a long-term orientation, incremental and radical innovation, ethics, and corporate social responsibility (Avery, 2005; Kantabutra, 2012; Kantabutra & Avery, 2011; Kantabutra & Suriyankietkaew, 2013). Building on these foundations, sustainable leadership has been associated with models such as authentic, responsible, and transformational leadership, each offering unique insights into leadership dynamics within SMEs (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass, 1985; Maak & Pless, 2006). Particularly, sustainable leadership entails not only making long-term decisions but also driving systemic innovation, nurturing workforce development, and delivering high-quality products and services (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Ranabahu & Wickramasinghe, 2022).

Research endeavours have explored the role of sustainable leadership in fostering organizational resilience, innovation, and competitiveness (Bansal & Song, 2017; Haroon et al., 2019; Kuenkel, 2016), as well as its antecedents, including personal values and ethical climates (Armani et al., 2020; Dey et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 1996). Furthermore, studies have investigated the impact of factors such as gender, nationality, and culture on the development of sustainable leadership practices, thereby enhancing our comprehension of leadership dynamics within diverse SME settings (Bulmer et al., 2021; Shinbrot et al., 2019). Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew's (2018) science mapping study identifies key research themes, sub-themes, influential authors, and journals in the field, while also underlining gaps and potential future research directions. By focusing on conceptualizations, measures, and outcomes of sustainable leadership, Liao analyses sustainable leadership at the individual and organizational levels (Liao, 2022).

Therefore, sustainable leadership and ambidextrous leadership represent critical dimensions of SME success. While sustainable leadership encompasses a holistic approach to balancing economic, social, and environmental imperatives, ambidextrous leadership focuses on managing exploitation and exploration to drive innovation and performance. The potential link, as well as potentially related challenges, are the focus of the study at hand.

The research gap identified in the introduction, concerning the understanding of how ambidextrous leadership contributes to sustainable leadership practices in SMEs, particularly in managing conflicting demands and supporting long-term orientation, is reflected in two distinct problems highlighted by this brief literature review. Firstly, the imperative of sustainable leadership in SMEs, as discussed by Assoratgoon & Kantabutra (2023), Lee et al. (2023), Liao (2022), and Odegbesan et al. (2023), underscores the critical need for SMEs to navigate challenges while steering towards long-term economic sustainability. Secondly, the management of exploitation and exploration, essential elements of ambidextrous leadership, emerges as a main concern in the literature (Ansah et al., 2021; He & Wong, 2004; Garretsen et al., 2020; Poon & Mohamad, 2020; Zacher & Rosing, 2015; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Turner et al., 2013). While some scholars emphasize the importance of balancing exploitation and exploration (Jansen et al., 2009; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Zacher & Rosing, 2015), others question whether focusing on one dimension over the other or adopting ambidextrous leadership altogether is more beneficial for SMEs (Samimi et al., 2022; Kang & Kim, 2020). Moreover, recent studies explicitly addressing sustainable leadership in SMEs within the framework of ambidextrous leadership explore multifaceted challenges faced by SMEs and strategies for overcoming them. Russo and Schena (2021) examine the role of strategic alliances in addressing the exploration-exploitation dilemma, while Hossain et al. (2023) emphasize the adoption of Industry 4.0 technologies and complex leadership approaches. Similarly, Malik et al. (2024) examines the interrelation between ambidextrous leadership style and human resource management practices in knowledge-intensive small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Their findings indicate that this approach exerts a beneficial influence on innovation, trust, and employee empowerment. Furthermore, foundational concepts such as Rhineland leadership, authentic leadership, responsible leadership, and transformational leadership are discussed in the literature, emphasizing long-term orientation, innovation, ethics, and corporate social responsibility as integral aspects of sustainable leadership in SMEs (Avery, 2005; Kantabutra, 2012; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Maak & Pless, 2006).

The intersection of sustainable leadership and ambidextrous leadership thus represents important dimensions of SME success, with potential links and challenges being the focus of the study. The study aims to gain insights into the mechanisms through which ambidextrous leadership can facilitate sustainable practices within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and presents evidence on how to foster long-term viability and success of SMEs.

## **Methodology**

For studying the research question at hand, we employed a comparative case study design (Eisenhardt, 1991; Yin, 2009). This design provides the possibility of an in-depth examination and comparison of multiple cases (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Harrison et al., 2017). It allows a comprehensive understanding of the investigated phenomenon and its influencing factors (Ridder, 2017). One company was a textile company that rented workwear to a small local customer base having a strong service culture. This was a financially strong and growing family business with approximately 140 employees. The other company was founded in 1823 and had been in the family for six generations. Now owned and run by two sons, it provided tax services to a large customer base across Germany. We assumed that the latter relied on remote work processes, whereas the former on closer personal relationships. **Table 3.1** summarizes the research design. The cases described represent both unique and critical instances within the study's context of investigating ambidextrous leadership and sustainable practices in SMEs. Firstly, the uniqueness of each case lies in their distinct characteristics and operational contexts. The textile company's emphasis on personal relationships and service culture, coupled with its status as a financially strong family business catering to a local customer base, distinguishes it from other SMEs. Similarly, the second company's multi-generational family ownership, long-standing history since 1823, and reliance on remote work processes for providing tax services across Germany set it apart as a unique case study subject. Moreover, the significance of these cases lies in their potential to provide invaluable insights into the research questions at hand. Each case represents a critical point of analysis for understanding the interplay between ambidextrous leadership and sustainable practices in SMEs. By examining these distinct contexts, the study can glean insights into the mechanisms through which ambidextrous leadership fosters sustainability within SMEs, ultimately contributing to their long-term viability and success.

For the first case company, the research team utilized the study design to investigate the implementation of organizational change. Daily self-reflections in the form of written diaries provided a unique window into the individual experiences and reflections of managers throughout the implementation process. This method allowed for real-time documentation of emotions, challenges, and breakthroughs encountered by managers, offering invaluable qualitative data for analysis. Expert interviews, conducted with senior and line managers, explain the specific aspects of the organizational change, garnering expert opinions and insights from those directly involved in the process. The audio recordings of these interviews ensured

the preservation of detailed responses and enabled researchers to revisit and analyse the discussions thoroughly. For the second case, the research team applied the same study design to evaluate the effectiveness of a leadership development program as for the first company. In comparing the two cases, several similarities and differences emerged. Both cases highlighted the importance of initial interviews in setting the context and objectives of the research, albeit with different focuses on organizational change and leadership development.

**Table 3.1**  
**Research Design**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Source</b>
Initial interview	Only senior managers	7/24	30 minutes / per interview	Audio recorded
Online kick-off	Senior and line managers	24/24	15 minutes / one session	Zoom recorded
Daily self-reflection in one working week	Senior and line managers	24/24	15 minutes / each day	Written diary
Expert interviews	Senior and line managers	24/24	90 minutes / per interview	Audio recorded

**Source: Authors.**

Data Collection. The senior managers of both cases supported our assumption and agreed to participate with their entire management teams. We conducted in-depth expert interviews with the entire management teams in two SMEs, identified in the university’s company network (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Denzin, 2007; Garretsen et al., 2020; Magilvy & Thomas, 2009). The initial interviews exclusively involved senior managers, allowing for in-depth discussions on the objectives, challenges, and anticipated outcomes of the change initiative. Through audio recordings, researchers captured nuanced insights regarding managerial perspectives and strategies. The online kick-off session, which included both senior and line managers, facilitated the dissemination of key information and fostered alignment among stakeholders. Zoom recordings enabled the researchers to observe non-verbal cues and interactions, enriching their understanding of managerial dynamics during the kick-off phase. Hence, our research design focused on a self-assessment of all senior and line managers (n = 24) of conflicting situations and their management reactions in the context of exploitative or explorative activities. Our research design followed three steps. First, we held an online kick-off session of approximately 15 minutes with all 24 managers to introduce the study and ourselves. Secondly, all senior and line managers participated in daily self-reflections for

approximately 15 minutes per day during one work week. These sessions focused on critical demands in connection with leadership situations. Third, building on the self-reflections, we conducted semi-structured expert interviews with all managers (**Table 3.1**). This became the main means of data collection. The semi-structured interview guide provided serves as a foundational tool for conducting a comparative case study focusing on the contexts and leadership behaviours of senior and line managers within organizations. This guide encompasses two primary sections: a warm-up segment centred on contextual factors and a main section focusing on leadership dynamics. Within the warm-up segment, the interviewer initiates the discussion by probing the interviewee's experiences with self-reflection, thereby setting the stage for introspective dialogue. Subsequent inquiries explain the interviewee's responsibilities, tasks, and the competitive landscape within their industry. This contextual understanding is further enriched by exploring both the overarching organizational culture and the specific cultural nuances within the interviewee's department. Additionally, the interviewer seeks to gauge the current atmosphere within the department to capture any recent developments or prevailing sentiments. Transitioning to the main part of the interview, attention shifts towards leadership-related inquiries. The interviewee is prompted to recount a specific leadership scenario documented in their diary study, providing a tangible basis for discussion. Through open-ended questioning, the interviewer seeks to elucidate the rationale behind the interviewee's leadership approach, thus unravelling their underlying motivations and decision-making processes. Exploratory dialogue ensues regarding potential alternative courses of action in the described situation as well as the perceived barriers preventing their adoption. This exploration extends to the interviewee's overarching leadership style, encompassing their general approach and any contextual factors influencing their leadership paradigm. Furthermore, the interviewers investigated the broader impact of additional factors on the interviewee's leadership behaviours, thereby capturing a holistic understanding of their leadership dynamics. Further, we have analysed documents, web pages, and LinkedIn profiles to better understand the company contexts.

**Table 3.2**  
**Semi-structured Interview Guide**

<b>Contexts and Leadership of Senior and Line Managers</b>
<p><u>Warm up (context)</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was your experience with the self-reflection?</li> <li>2. Can you describe your responsibilities and tasks?</li> <li>3. Briefly describe the competition in your industry.</li> <li>4. Briefly describe the culture in your organization.</li> <li>5. Briefly describe the culture in your department.</li> <li>6. Briefly describe the current atmosphere in your department.</li> </ol> <p><u>Main part (leadership)</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Can you describe one of the leadership situations from the diary study in more detail?</li> <li>8. Can you describe why you have led in the described way?</li> <li>9. Would there have been other options for you?</li> <li>10. What prevented you from doing this?</li> <li>11. How would you generally describe your leadership?</li> <li>12. Are there other factors that have an impact on your leadership?</li> <li>13. What does it mean for you to lead in an explorative or exploitative way?</li> </ol>

**Source: Authors.**

Data Analysis. The study produced 72 hours of data. To analyse the data, we used an approach following the suggestions by Gioia et al. (2013) which provides researchers with a systematic and flexible process of analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Schulte et al., 2020). Following this approach, the initial stage, termed 1st-order analysis, prioritizes fidelity to informant terms, resulting in a profusion of categories. As the research progresses, researchers step into a process akin to axial coding, seeking similarities and differences among emerging categories to distil them into a more manageable set. This reduction typically yields 25 to 30 germane categories (Gioia et al., 2013). Subsequently, researchers label these categories or provide phrasal descriptors, drawing from informant terms where possible. The analysis then shifts towards discerning deeper structures within this array, prompting researchers to engage with the data at multiple levels of abstraction. In the 2nd-order analysis, researchers move

firmly into the theoretical territory, exploring whether emerging themes suggest concepts capable of describing and explaining observed phenomena. Special attention is accorded to novel concepts lacking adequate theoretical grounding or pre-existing concepts deemed relevant to the research domain. The culmination of this process, termed theoretical saturation, signifies the attainment of a workable set of themes and concepts. Researchers then investigate the potential for further distillation of emergent 2nd-order themes into 2nd-order aggregate dimensions. The final step involves constructing a data structure, which serves as an important aspect of the research approach. Consequently, we conducted initial data coding and classified informant-centric statements, guided by our research questions (Langley, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, we identified similarities and differences, and each of the researchers created a comprehensive set of 1st-order concepts. Thereafter, we thoroughly discussed the concepts and their relationships. Based on this, and informed by the literature, 2nd-order themes emerged. We aggregated the second-order themes into dimensions and further advanced the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) with the notion of conflict (Samimi et al., 2022). These results and identified main themes are presented in detail in the results chapter below. **Table 3.4** and **Table 3.5** show this process more systematically.

**Table 3.3**  
**Results of Case 1**

1st-Order Concepts	2nd-Order Themes	Aggregated Dimensions	Conflicting Demands
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management is open to new ideas</li> <li>- Management allows employees to deviate from norms</li> <li>- Management sets a rough framework</li> </ul>	<p>Allowing freedom (n = 8/12)</p>	<p>Explorative leadership activities</p>	<p><b>Exploitation-Exploration Conflict</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management provides food for thought</li> <li>- Management encourages employees</li> <li>- Management discusses and decides as a team</li> </ul>	<p>Encouraging learning (n = 12/12)</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management motivates people to try things out</li> <li>- Management allows employees to contribute</li> <li>- Management is interested in change</li> </ul>	<p>Encouraging new ideas (n = 10/12)</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management wants to be copied in emails</li> <li>- Management wants to be included in important decisions</li> <li>- Management wants to intervene</li> </ul>	<p>Monitoring plans and routines (n = 5/12)</p>	<p>Exploitative leadership activities</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management specifies task completion</li> </ul>	<p>Controlling goal attainment (n = 5/12)</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management has acceptance for the upcoming reconstruction</li> <li>- Management perceives upcoming changes as a positive challenge</li> <li>- Management wants to turn the wheel</li> </ul>	<p>Accepting change as positive challenge (n = 12/12)</p>	<p>Slowed down decision- making</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management avoids having conflicts</li> <li>- Management avoids sanctioning</li> <li>- Management avoids consequences</li> </ul>	<p>Avoiding exploitative leadership activities (n = 10/12)</p>		

Source: Authors.

**Table 3.4**  
**Results of Case 2**

<b>1st-Order Concepts</b>	<b>2nd-Order Themes</b>	<b>Aggregated Dimensions</b>	<b>Conflicting Demands</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informal culture vs. unable to retain employees</li> <li>- Employees in focus vs. senior managers far away</li> </ul>	Sending ambiguous management signals (n = 8/12)	Ambiguous management signals	<b>No conflict at the senior management level</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Innovation only comes from senior managers</li> <li>- Senior managers provide strategic direction</li> <li>- Line managers implement strategies</li> </ul>	Exerting Top-down decisions (n = 7/12)	Exploitative leadership activities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Senior managers' strong controlling behaviour based on numbers</li> <li>- Senior managers assert pressure to perform</li> </ul>	Exerting Pressure and controlling (n = 7/12)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line managers try to think of the company as a team</li> </ul>	Supporting team orientation (n = 5/12)	Appreciation and caretaking activities	<b>Exploitation-Exploration Conflict at the line management level</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line managers listen to the problems of employees</li> <li>- Line managers send regular "thank you" emails to employees</li> <li>- Line managers support wherever possible</li> </ul>	Appreciating employees (n = 8/12)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line managers try to motivate employees</li> <li>- Line managers and employees conduct projects jointly</li> <li>- Line managers encourage the pursuit of employees' ideas</li> </ul>	Encouraging employees (n = 5/12)	Explorative leadership activities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line managers try to give room for ideas in meetings</li> <li>- Line managers provide employees with skills for autonomous work</li> </ul>	Allowing freedom (n = 4/12)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line managers enforce the interests of the senior management</li> <li>- Line managers provide clear structures</li> <li>- Line managers adhere to checklists and rules provided by the senior management</li> </ul>	Controlling employees (n = 7/12)	Exploitative leadership pressure	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line manager: "We are overloaded"</li> <li>- Our credo: "Higher, faster, further"</li> </ul>	Experiencing Pressure (n = 8/12)		

**Source: Authors.**

Validity. In ensuring the validity of the comparative case study's approach and study results, several strategies were employed. Firstly, the study design, rooted in Eisenhardt (1991) and Yin (2009)'s comparative case study framework, facilitated an in-depth examination and comparison of two distinct cases. This design choice was reinforced by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) and Harrison et al.'s (2017) recognition of its efficacy in providing comprehensive understandings of complex phenomena. The sampled companies, representing different industries and organizational structures, were meticulously selected to offer rich insights into the research question. Detailed descriptions of the companies' backgrounds, including their histories, financial statuses, and operational characteristics, were provided to contextualize the study. Data collection methods were rigorously implemented to ensure the reliability and depth of the gathered information. Utilizing expert interviews with entire management teams, as recommended by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), Denzin (2007), and Garretsen et al. (2020), enabled a thorough exploration of conflicting situations and management reactions. The incorporation of daily self-reflections and semi-structured interviews further enriched the dataset, allowing for nuanced insights into leadership behaviours and organizational dynamics. By involving both senior and line managers in the data collection process, the study aimed to capture diverse perspectives and experiences, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings. Regular discussions among researchers facilitated consensus-building and minimized potential biases in interpretation, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings. Lastly, we addressed the issue of validity by ensuring a meaningful comparison since the cases should have relevant similarities and sufficient diversity (Gerring & McDermott, 2007; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Moreover, to verify assumptions regarding the cases and recruit participants, we conducted initial interviews with only the senior management of both SMEs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

## **Results**

Based on the approach outlined above, the following section attempts to provide a cohesive overview of the findings and results of our study. To achieve transparency and an exhaustive overview of the findings, we will work with direct quotes from our interviews.

### **Case 1**

In the first considered company, the senior and line managers identified strongly with the organization, which was reflected in a strong family-like identity, their close personal relationships, and a long tenure.

“I find the culture very family-like. Everyone who works for us feels appreciated and welcomed. Every employee has a coffee meeting with the management two months after being hired because I want to know the names of the people who work here. I would like to wish them a happy birthday, I would like to know how my employees’ the mother, who lives in Kiev, is doing. Monday is always the day when I go through the company.”  
(Case 1\_ Senior Manager 3)

“When you start working for us now, I will accompany your children to high school graduation, and you will accompany me to my retirement.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 1)

However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting in remote working, these strong personal relationships have suffered, and cohesion in the company had weakened.

“When I went back to the company and talked to my colleagues, I noticed that many of them were totally dissatisfied and said that there was no longer any real cohesion in the company and no common path at all. No one was really motivated to implement new ideas.”  
(Case 1\_Line Manager 7)

The company operated in a niche market and distinguished itself from other workwear suppliers with an excellent customer service. During the COVID 19 pandemic, the company’s business experienced growth because of increased demand for workwear that required more frequent cleaning due to higher hygiene standards.

“Anyone can clean coats. Unlike our competitors, we have excellent customer service.”  
(Case 1\_Line Manager 8, Case 1\_Senior Manager 1)

“Overall, the pandemic was positive for us. We do not only clean hotel laundry but are well represented in other industries, too. In some industries, there are more hygienic regulations, which means clothes must be washed more often, and of course we benefit from that and do not have a problem.” (Case 1\_ Senior Manager 1)

The dimension 'explorative leadership activities' emerged from the aggregation of the 2nd-order themes 'allowing freedom', 'encouraging learning', and 'encouraging new ideas'. Similarly,

'monitoring plans and routines' and 'controlling goal attainment' were aggregated into the dimension of 'exploitative leadership activities'. Many senior and line managers expressed their desire to exert more exploitative leadership activities but faced difficulties in doing so. The 2nd-order themes 'accepting change initiatives as a positive challenge' and 'avoiding exploitative activities' resulted in 'slowed down decision-making.' The management recognized the need for exploitative activities as a crucial part of initiating change processes. However, avoiding this seemed to be partly due to the strong family context. These dimensions revealed an imbalance between exploratory and exploitative activities, leading to an exploitation-exploration conflict. Several open and closed leadership activities could be identified:

The line managers drew parallels between the explorative leadership of the senior management and a route that allowed them to operate freely rather than simply follow a predetermined course. Many line managers expressed a preference for having a general leadership overview and the freedom to navigate within a given but broad structure.

“I do not run to my boss for every decision. I want to make my own decisions and only be given a framework. I have the feeling that my boss sees this in the same way.”  
(Case 1\_Line Manager 2)

“The management never says, “Oh, we’ve never done it that way before.” They never put a stop to it; I can always try things.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 6)

The senior and line managers emphasized the importance of an attitude that encouraged learning within the organization. One member of the senior management had previously been a teacher and explained that his professional life had been dedicated to the development of young people. He emphasized that this was important in his present leadership position.

“I am a teacher by profession. My entire career was designed to support young people. And I have incorporated this into my management style, too.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 1)

“This means I give my employees a lot of space, and I want them to fill this space themselves and make their own mistakes and learn from this.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 4)

“The employee should not take a hint as a decision but as food for thought.”  
(Case 1\_Line Manager 3)

The senior and line managers of this case preferred open leadership activities, as employees were given opportunities to develop new ideas without fearing negative consequences. Several examples illustrated that the line managers encouraged their employees to share ideas and perspectives while receiving support from the senior management to explore themselves:

“Senior management supports everything. When I have a new idea, they say: What is the idea based on? What do you want to achieve? And then I can implement it. The management understands that times are changing and therefore supports our explorative ideas. I never had my bosses saying: “Don’t bother me with this.” By contrast, they are always extremely interested in change and new ideas.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 4)

“I don’t try to put my own idea in the centre of everything, I’d rather try to let the other one come up with something new.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 8)

“If I have an employee who is very motivated, I let him do. I encourage him to try out things within a structure that I provide.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 5)

The senior and line managers expressed their will to be involved in decision-making processes that have an impact on the entire organization, important negotiations with a client, or a decision with significant financial implications. In such scenarios, the managers aimed to intervene at any time, as minor errors could have far-reaching consequences.

“It is about a new 13 million Euro contract; nothing should go wrong. That is why I always want to be in copy here.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 2)

“If it is, for instance, a matter of coordinating a very important organizational process that might have an impact on all of us, I really want to be more closely informed so that I can intervene if I must.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 3)

Some tasks required a certain degree of control, particularly when the tasks had to be executed according to specific standards owing to legal or regulatory requirements.

“For instance, mass production. If I assign a task where there is no leeway but a clear framework and corresponding completion within a certain time frame, I can control whether the goal is attained in the end.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 5)

The managers perceived upcoming change as a positive challenge. This implied that they understood that change was necessary, but they had yet to determine the most appropriate course of action. All managers were positively excited about change initiatives:

“We know that we must move the wheel in a different direction. Not turn it 180 degrees, but we must adjust it. We do not know exactly in which direction yet, but we must do it.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 2)

“We have so many new, and at the same time big, issues right now that we’re looking forward to, but ... we don’t know what’s going to come out, how we’re going to approach that exactly.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 4)

“We are aware that change is coming, and this is exciting.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 1)

Although the managers were aware that change was necessary, they faced challenges due to their family identity, which discouraged exploitative and closed leadership activities. This made it difficult to implement change initiatives, conduct decision-making processes, and monitor the plans necessary for a successful change.

“In the future, we must be able to make an unpleasant decision for an employee if we find it to be the best thing for the company.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 1)

“We too often lead without clear targets. It would make sense to have more sanctions, clearer targets, more control—this is just missing. In many situations, there is a lack of pressure from senior management, and new ideas just ripple along, and nothing is really implemented.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 6)

It seems that the management avoided placing a strong emphasis on exploitative and closed leadership activities because such activities seemed socially undesirable in their family context. A senior manager summarized the issue as follows:

“Since we also like to party together, it is sometimes difficult for us to bring in a certain seriousness and to sanction certain things. We are too soft in some areas and do not have the courage to address certain things. It is maybe someone who has been there for 20 years, and you do not want to hurt that person.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 4)

“Often, we are not consistent. For instance, I had sales managers who failed to deliver their figures for two years, yet we did not dismiss them; we offered them another opportunity.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 1)

Avoiding closed leadership activities included several quotes demonstrating the critical self-assessment of management practices.

“Our main weakness is a lack of consequences. We are quite bad at sanctioning. We are not good at clearly formulating tasks and drawing consequences when these tasks are not done properly.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 2)

“Some of us do not want any friction with the senior management. They prefer to do things the way the senior management wants them to be done and not try anything else. Just so that the relationship with the CEO does not suffer. We really need to work on these issues.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 2)

The senior and line managers' leadership activities balanced autonomy and control. They aimed to improve their ability to make tough decisions only when necessary.

“In the future, it is important to make better decisions, sometimes even unpleasant ones.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 1)

The senior and line managers recognized that their exploitative and closed leadership activities were not sufficient, so they sought to create a framework that would allow for clear communication.

“In smaller projects, I allow employees to work within a clear framework and set boundaries.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 1)

“For each new contract, our old sales manager used to say, “We will decide individually whether we take this new customer or not.” There were no clear guidelines. Now, I try to lead in a clear and structured way and say: “No, we have our guidelines, and we are not going to decide individually. Stick to the guidelines.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 1)

The management team recognized the importance of maintaining control over certain aspects of the organization that may have far-reaching consequences or involve legal requirements.

“For instance, if there is a lot of money involved, I want to be in control and be in the loop so that I can intervene.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 2)

Despite uncertainty, the management team recognized the need for change and embraced it as a positive and exciting challenge. This was evident in several interview quotes.

“The outcome of change is uncertain, and renewal tends to be difficult for us, but we know that something must move.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 3)

“We look forward to a change. The generational change helps there as well. New, younger employees help because they bring a fresh perspective.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 4)

The senior and line managers demonstrated a sense of critical self-reflection and sought external support. They regularly participated in workshops with an external consulting firm and collaborated with the local university. Even though the management team was prepared for change, they considered the family identity as a crucial aspect of the organization. All the management team members understood that they had to proceed with caution.

“Tomorrow, for example, we are meeting in the evening at a colleague’s house who invited us. We all know each other so we also do a lot together.” (Case 1\_Line Manager 3)

“Today, it is a little different. People do not identify with the company that much anymore, but that is especially important that you identify with a company, and this is at the heart of our company values.” (Case 1\_Senior Manager 6)

The findings revealed that the senior and line managers collectively managed their conflicts by engaging in critical self-reflection, seeking external support, balancing autonomy and control, embracing change, and maintaining their family identity.

## **Case 2**

The organizational context of the second organization under scrutiny was characterized by an emphasis on digitalization and a strong interest in innovation. The two senior managers regularly travelled to Silicon Valley.

“We constantly try out the latest digital systems. We even have a "Digi-Team" that helps employees understand new systems. You can book them to understand the system better.”  
(Case 2\_Senior Manager 4)

“I have been here for 15 years. Our focus is on staying up to date with the latest innovation in the market. We regularly evaluate new systems and evaluate their implementation.”  
(Case 2\_Line Manager 3)

“We have an almost paperless office. Anyone who wants to can work from home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, every office workstation was duplicated at home.”  
(Case 2\_Line Manager 8)

The external context was affected by the legal requirement for companies to submit a tax declaration. Additionally, the government's support in relation with COVID-19 increased the number of inquiries.

“When I look at the influx of clients, we really do have about 20 new inquiries each day.”  
(Case 2\_Senior Manager 2)

We could not identify any conflict at the senior management level. The dimensions here were ‘ambiguous management signals’ and ‘exploitative leadership activities.’ We observed a different situation at the line management level. Their aggregated dimensions were ‘appreciation and caretaking activities’, ‘explorative leadership activities’, and ‘exploitative leadership pressure’. These line managers’ dimensions resulted in a conflict relating to exploitation-exploration as well as time at the line management level. According to some of the interviewees, the senior management of this case was trying to establish an open atmosphere through the implementation of different initiatives like a culture of “first name base” for instance. The senior managers described that employees are their most valuable resource. In the beginning, the atmosphere of the second case seemed open and approachable.

“The senior management is open to all kinds of suggestions from other people, which are always passed on to us as team leaders. They do everything they can to make sure we are well positioned for the future.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 4)

“It is very relaxed. You do not have to be afraid of the boss at all. You can talk to them; you know you will get help. This was different during the last few years, but now they are a bit more tangible and not so far away from our day-to-day business. We are also on a first-name basis with the managers, so they are close.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 1)

“One of the things that we learned in Silicon Valley is that the employee should always be in the focus of our activities.” (Case 2\_Senior Manager 1)

However, the line managers expressed their concern about a perceived lack of appreciation.

“There is a lack of saying thank you. The only time something is done is when the boss is approached directly, and feedback is very scarce.” (Case 2\_Line Manager\_5)

“There is no such thing as employee retention here. I do not understand why we let good people go. Just because you do not want to pay this person a little more money, you let someone go who is trained and knows all the processes. We have a remarkably high turnover rate. Very unfortunate.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 3)

One employee had achieved high monthly sales and, proud of his achievement, presented the numbers to the senior management with his supervisor. However, instead of complimenting him, the senior management told him that another employee had done better. Several line managers have described senior management as difficult to reach.

“The management is sometimes quite far away. A direct contact with the senior management would sometimes be better.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 7)

The senior management made strategic decisions through a top-down approach without considering the opinions of the line managers or employees.

“It is us making all the strategic decisions.” (Case 2\_Senior Manager 2)

“Innovation comes from the senior management; we as team leaders just help to implement.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 8)

“Then, I get a call from the senior management: “here you are, three new mandates; distribute them to this and that person in your team.” The senior management does not account for the interests of each team member.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 5)

The senior managers closely monitored employee performance and pressured the employees to deliver monthly results.

“In the structures in which we work, it is all about numbers, about capacity, about turnover. The senior management looks at figures every day and tries to optimize things. If you have a little bit less to do, then you get additional work from senior management.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 6)

“A lot of people on my team are overloaded, which is not noticed by the senior management.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 9)

The line managers tried to regulate the exploitative leadership activities of the senior management. They attempted to create an approachable environment by addressing the concerns and needs of employees and establishing an open atmosphere.

“My leadership behaviour is very much geared towards ensuring that the staff feels well integrated into the team.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 4)

“As the team leader, I aim to maintain a collaborative work environment where my team members feel valued and respected. I do not consider them to be reporting to me; rather, they are my colleagues.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 2)

Moreover, they functioned as people managers by fostering employee involvement through a variety of initiatives. These initiatives included providing opportunities for team members to express their concerns, encouraging open communication, and acknowledging and rewarding individual and team contributions. The interview quotes emphasized the importance for line managers to value their employees.

“I regularly write emails to my team members in which I thank them for their great work; I also write where things are still not right, where we need to adjust.”  
(Case 2\_Line Manager 8)

“I try to talk to people in the morning and in the evening, listen to their problems, and support them where I can.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 3)

The line managers tried to adopt an explorative and open leadership approach. This included encouraging employees and, wherever possible, providing their team members with the freedom to explore.

“I try to encourage people to research themselves and think about a problem before they approach me. So, first bring in your own ideas, and then ask me for support. That is what I try to actively encourage in my team members.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 7)

“We have fixed processes, but everyone in my team also could contribute to new ideas. For example, we now have a certain process in our team on how to proceed with the annual financial statement, which is the same throughout the whole company. We thought through this process in the whole team and said: “Ok, can’t we develop something better so that we can get the money faster? Because invoicing always comes at the very end.” We are now in a test phase.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 1)

As a result of the pressure, control, and lack of appreciation from the senior management, the line managers applied closed leadership activities only when necessary. This seemed to be a contradiction to their attempt to encourage open leadership activities.

“Checklists from senior management specify how to complete tasks. As a team leader, I closely monitor adherence.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 6)

The line managers had their own responsibilities and clients to manage. The combination of management duties, work assignments, and intensive supervision created a time conflict.

“I am often contacted to answer issues related to day-to-day work. In addition, I also have my own mandates to look after.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 9).

“We always really have a lot of time pressure, so there is not much time to look left and right.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 4)

In summary, the senior management sent ambiguous management signals. On the one hand, they appeared open and approachable, and on the other hand, they exerted a lot of pressure and control. The line managers attempted to motivate and integrate their employees, but at the same time they had to deal with their own tasks and a considerable amount of pressure.

“I am very easy-going. I have known the people I work with for a long time. To be in this sandwich position between senior management and employees is positive on the one hand

and difficult on the other. I have a buddy role but simultaneously serve the interests of the senior management.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 3)

The line managers functioned as a bridge between the senior management and their employees. They tried to maintain a balance between acting as friends to their team members (“I certainly don’t want my team members to perceive me as a leader”; Case 2\_Line Manager 4) and forwarding the interests of the senior management (“Then, I have to pass on the tough announcements coming from the senior management to my team members”; Case 2\_Line Manager 4). This put a considerable time pressure on the line management.

“I look around me. Many employees cannot cope with the controlling behaviour, the pressure, and leave our company.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 5)

“Many employees leave because they can’t handle the pressure.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 7)

While facing high pressure, many line managers tried to organize their workload. For instance, they scheduled days to address their employee’s needs. On these days, they simply listened to their employees' concerns, as one line manager explained.

“I am in the office two days a week, and that is when I am only there for my people. Just a contact person to take care of my employees’ needs. I do not do anything in my day-to-day business then.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 6)

It appeared that the line managers were trying to regulate the anxiety of their employees because of the pressure and control exercised by the senior management. They encouraged employees to use their freedom to experiment. However, owing to the pressure from the senior management, many employees were afraid to take risks.

“There were reports of bullying under the previous team manager. Currently, my focus is on rebuilding the team's confidence and encouraging them to take initiative.”  
(Case 2\_Line Manager 5)

“I am spending a lot of time rebuilding the confidence of my people. Unfortunately, there was some bullying under the previous team leader, and now I frequently remind them: “You are capable and do not need to check your work excessively.” (Case 2\_Line Manager 4)

The line managers attempted to regulate the senior management's exploitative and closed leadership activities by counterbalancing them with explorative leadership activities of appreciation, encouragement, and giving more freedom to their employees.

Comparing the results

In the context of Case 1, we have observed an exploitation-exploration conflict for senior and line managers, and exploitative leadership activities were socially undesirable. This conflict had resulted from the management's emphasis on explorative and open leadership activities and an attempt to avoid exploitative leadership activities. In the context of their family identity, the senior and line managers collectively managed this conflict between exploitation and exploration (Argyris, 1995; Denison et al., 2004; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). They regarded change positively, although it may also have caused them to avoid exerting necessary exploitative leadership activities and be more lenient in enforcing strict measures or sanctions (Kets de Vries, 1993). The commitment of the senior and line managers to collectively engage in critical self-reflection, seeking external support, balancing autonomy and control, embracing change, and maintaining a family-like identity supported the long-term orientation of the organization (Liao, 2022). The fact that Case 1 was a financially solid and growing company during the COVID-19 pandemic could have reinforced simplicity (Miller, 1993). The simplicity theory argues that successful organizations tend to become simpler over time. Their strategies become more specific, their cultures reflect a singular perspective, and their systems and routines become more concentrated. This can lead to a rigid structure that lacks diversity and subtlety, causing such companies to operate more like predictable machines and lose the ability to adapt or learn from unexpected events. Highly uniform organizations eliminate different viewpoints and alternative approaches, reducing their flexibility and hindering their ability to adapt or learn. When these organizations are perfectly aligned with their environment, they can achieve remarkable success and inspire others to follow a similar path, despite the risks (Miller, 1993). However, we observed the ability of senior and line managers to critically self-reflect their actions and seek external support, which were important prerequisites for an organization's ability to learn (e.g., double-loop learning) and develop (Corley & Gioia, 2003;

Miller, 1993). In summary, the family-like identity of this company supported the collective leadership efforts of the senior and line managers, facilitated organizational learning, but slowed down decision-making processes (Miller, 1993; Ramachandran & Bhatnagar, 2015). In the context of Case 2, we did not notice any conflict at the senior management level. In this case, we observed a lack of organizational identity and found that only the line management was facing a conflict between exploitation and exploration (Wenke et al., 2021). This conflict had emerged from the fact that the line management was to a considerable extent left alone with explorative leadership activities because the senior management was mainly engaged in exploitative leadership activities. The conflict of the line managers was intensified by the fact that they also had their own management and work tasks to fulfil (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). The line management had tried to adopt a dual role, to organize better and to regulate the fear of their employees. They attempted to enforce control measures only when necessary (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Saks, 2021). In contrast to Case 1, we were not able to identify a strong family context or a common understanding of leadership. As a result, we did not observe any form of collective leadership but rather a division of leadership activities. On the one hand, the focus of the senior management on exploitative leadership activities resulted in a lack of appreciation, employee dissatisfaction, and a high turnover. On the other hand, the line management was engaged in explorative leadership activities, caring for employees and work tasks (Table 3.3, second-order themes). This partially compensated for the exploitative leadership activities of the senior management but made it more difficult to maintain a long-term orientation. The counter-management activities we observed were like those found in Gjerde and Alvesson's (2020) study of middle managers in an academic context, "protecting from and removing fear" and "recruiting for and creating academic culture" (p. 138). In both cases, we discovered a phenomenon which we called 'Nonexploitative Exploitation.' The senior and line managers in both organizations tried to make sure that employees were not exploited in a negative sense, because excessive exploitation could have negative impact on employees. With Nonexploitative Exploitation, both SMEs tried to achieve a long-term orientation of their management activities. In Case 1, the senior and line managers described that their family-like context of appreciation and interest in employee's needs, led to long-term loyalty with the company. Involving employees was important, even if it slowed down the process to some extent. In Case 2, the statements of the managers described how the line managers tried to counterbalance the ambiguous management signals, lack of appreciation, and pressure from the senior management that resulted in fluctuation.

The comparative case analysis of Case 1 and Case 2 revealed distinct leadership approaches and organizational contexts. In Case 1, a familial culture prevails, fostering strong personal relationships and long tenures among employees. This environment encouraged open leadership activities, such as promoting learning and providing autonomy to employees. However, the familial culture also posed challenges in implementing changes due to its discouragement of closed leadership activities.

Conversely, Case 2 emphasized digitalization and innovation, characterized by a top-down leadership approach and ambiguous management signals. Line managers in Case 2 attempted to balance the pressure and control exerted by senior management by providing more freedom and encouragement to their employees. However, they faced challenges in rebuilding employee confidence and reducing turnover rates due to a perceived lack of appreciation from the senior management.

Overall, while Case 1 prioritized employee engagement and recognition within a familial culture, Case 2 focused on innovation and digitalization but struggled with maintaining employee morale and retention. Both cases underscored the importance of balancing autonomy and control and fostering a supportive work environment to enhance organizational effectiveness, thus underscoring the importance of organizational culture and collective leadership efforts in promoting sustainable practices within SMEs. While Case 1 highlighted the benefits of a familial culture in fostering organizational learning and adaptation, Case 2 emphasized the challenges of maintaining employee morale and retention in the absence of a cohesive organizational identity. These insights contributed to our understanding of how ambidextrous leadership influences sustainable leadership practices in SMEs and offered implications for enhancing organizational effectiveness and long-term success.

## **Discussion**

In Case 1, Nonexploitative Exploitation was achieved through collective leadership activities in a family context. In Case 2, Nonexploitative Exploitation was partly achieved through the line managers' attempt to counterbalance the exploitative activities of their senior managers. In this respect, our study advances the understanding of sustainable leadership activities in SMEs. From a theoretical perspective, our results provide insights into how SMEs can address the conflicting demands of exploitation and exploration. The findings of Case 1 demonstrate how Nonexploitative Exploitation can promote long-term orientation and support sustainable leadership activities. (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018; Samimi et al., 2022). The findings

of Case 2 reveal how long-term orientation and support for sustainable leadership activities can partly be achieved through Nonexploitative Exploitation efforts exerted not by the senior management but by their line managers who are closer to the employees (Garretsen et al., 2020; Liao, 2022). From a practical perspective, Case 1 demonstrated the importance of supportive leadership activities which foster a trust-based environment where employees feel involved. This suggests a shift from traditional top-down towards more inclusive leadership approaches. The implications of Case 2 suggest that when the senior management is predominantly exploitative, the line managers can play an important role in counterbalancing this. Such an approach can result in a time conflict because the line managers are in a contradicting position, sandwiched between pressure from management and the task of maintaining employee morale (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). Through Nonexploitative Exploitation, both SMEs in our study tried to implement a less destructive form of exploitation and demonstrated how this concept can take different forms (Garretsen et al.; 2020, Wenke et al., 2021).

We can deduct that our study on sustainable leadership and ambidexterity in SMEs provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between leadership styles, organizational culture, and managerial practices. With this specific research focus in mind, the findings from Case 1 depict a company characterised by a familial culture, where senior and line managers prioritise personal relationships and employee well-being (Ceja et al., 2012; Karofsky et al., 2001; Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2022; Pradhan & Hati, 2022). The strong identification with the organisation fosters a sense of belonging and loyalty among employees (Basly & Saunier, 2020). This familial context encourages open leadership activities, such as promoting learning, providing autonomy, and supporting explorative ideas (Fries et al., 2021; Kandade et al., 2021). One of the key findings in Case 1 is the exploitation-exploration conflict observed among senior and line managers. While the organization values explorative leadership activities, such as encouraging learning and allowing freedom, there is a reluctance to embrace exploitative activities due to the familial context. This imbalance between exploitation and exploration poses challenges in decision-making processes and change initiatives, as avoiding exploitative activities hinders the implementation of necessary measures and sanctions. This has, so far, rarely been studied (Luong, 2022).

Moreover, the study identifies the phenomenon of 'Nonexploitative Exploitation,' wherein senior and line managers strive to prevent employee exploitation while maintaining a long-term orientation. This involves balancing the need for control and autonomy to ensure employee well-being and organizational sustainability. Similar research exists, but none of it is related to

this specific research context and with such applicable results to sustainable leadership and ambidexterity (Bocean et al., 2022; Emre & De Spiegeleare, 2021; Stankevičienė et al., 2021). The findings thus suggest that the familial culture in Case 1 contributes to long-term loyalty and employee satisfaction, albeit at the expense of slower decision-making processes. Further researching the specific issue of impact on decision-making processes might be an interesting future research alley.

In contrast, Case 2 presents a different organizational context characterized by a focus on digitalization and innovation. Here, the senior management exerts pressure and control through exploitative leadership activities, leading to a lack of appreciation and high turnover rates among employees. Line managers attempt to counterbalance these pressures by fostering an open and supportive work environment, but they face challenges in rebuilding employee confidence and reducing turnover. This is a highly interesting phenomenon, which to date had not been discussed in related studies, despite indications from previous studies (Kammerlander et al., 2020; Knight & Cuganesan, 2020). It appears highly advisable to also make a strong plea for further research in this direction.

Therefore, our study contributes to the understanding of sustainable leadership and ambidexterity in SMEs. It highlights the importance of organizational culture in shaping leadership practices and the need to balance conflicting demands for exploration and exploitation. The findings suggest that while a familial culture may foster employee loyalty, it can also hinder organizational adaptability and decision-making processes. On the other hand, a focus on innovation and digitalization may drive competitiveness but can also lead to employee dissatisfaction and turnover if not accompanied by supportive leadership practices. The study underscores the essential role of organisational culture in shaping leadership behaviours and driving sustainable outcomes (Isensee et al., 2020; Xenikou, 2022). Through contrasting cases, it demonstrates how different cultural norms and values influence leadership practices and organisational success (Cadden et al., 2020; Lasrado & Kassem, 2020). This insight empowers SMEs to cultivate a supportive work environment aligned with their long-term objectives, thus providing a link between sustainable leadership and ambidexterity.

## **Conclusion**

In analysing the two cases presented, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the connection between sustainable leadership and ambidexterity in SMEs.

Firstly, the familial culture depicted in Case 1 highlights the significance of personal relationships and employee well-being within the organization. This culture fosters open leadership activities, promoting learning and autonomy among employees. However, there exists an imbalance between explorative and exploitative activities, with a reluctance to embrace the latter due to the familial context. While this culture engenders long-term loyalty and satisfaction among employees, it may hinder organizational adaptability and decision-making processes. Conversely, Case 2 illustrates a focus on digitalization and innovation, characterized by exploitative leadership activities from senior management. This pressure and control lead to employee dissatisfaction and high turnover rates. Despite efforts by line managers to foster an open and supportive work environment, they face challenges in rebuilding employee confidence.

Overall, these contrasting cases underscore the importance of organizational culture in shaping leadership practices and driving sustainable outcomes in SMEs. They highlight the need to balance conflicting demands for exploration and exploitation, with organizational culture playing a crucial role in shaping leadership behaviours. While a familial culture may foster loyalty and satisfaction among employees, it could impede organizational adaptability. Conversely, a focus on innovation and digitalization may enhance competitiveness but could lead to employee dissatisfaction if not accompanied by supportive leadership practices.

At the same time, the focus on only senior and line managers can be seen as a limitation of this study. People tend to view themselves positively, known as “self-serving bias” (Miller & Ross, 1975, p. 213). The managers we interviewed may have portrayed their leadership in a more favourable light than it was the case. We may have missed some of the complexities within the leader-employee dynamic (Maak & Pless, 2006). We suggest that future research should include other perspectives to have a better picture of what happened in this context. The fact that we investigated only two SMEs in a comparative case study makes it difficult to draw general conclusions for all SMEs. This is why future research should evaluate our concept within a larger sample. Furthermore, our study could have included SMEs from different industries and different sizes. This would have helped to identify additional influencing factors. Beyond that, the integration of questionnaires, surveys, or longitudinal data would have strengthened the trustworthiness of our findings (Denzin, 2007). Our study empirically

established the concept of Nonexploitative Exploitation. We suggest that future research further develops the concept, expanding its application to a larger and more diverse sample of SMEs. Future research could also examine organisational and individual characteristics such as power structures, personality traits, cognitive styles, and cultural aspects. This would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of how to manage conflicting demands and support sustainable leadership activities (Hofstede, 2011; Song et al., 2020). While for SMEs, a supportive organisational identity seems important to promote sustainable leadership activities (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018; Liao, 2022), it may be appropriate to distribute exploration and exploitation across different management levels (Wenke et al., 2021).

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## Chapter 4

### Implicit Leadership Dynamics within National Contexts

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#### Abstract

The study employs a ten-year dataset (2009-2019) from six national newspaper publications to analyse implicit leadership prototypes in German newspaper narratives within the framework of Culturally Endorsed Implicit Leadership Theories (CLT). It explores how cultural values and media discourses shape the perceptions of leadership, examining the distribution and representation of six CLT dimensions across German newspapers, with a focus on their alignment with societal leadership expectations. The findings reveal an emphasis on Autonomous and Humane-oriented Leadership, corresponding with Germany's cultural preference for independence and empathy. Charismatic and Participative Leadership traits also feature prominently, indicating an evolving preference for value-oriented and collaborative leadership. Conversely, Team-oriented and Self-protective Leadership receive less representation. A comparative analysis of the framing of newspaper editorials reveals a distinct preference of business-focused newspapers which emphasise Autonomous and Charismatic Leadership, while those of a more generalist and sensationalist nature offer less nuanced descriptions. The study advances Implicit Leadership Theories (ILT) by integrating cultural and media-specific contexts, underscoring the media's dual role in reflecting and shaping leadership perceptions in the population. It calls for a cross-cultural analysis, drawing parallels between leadership images in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America to enhance leadership strategies in an increasingly globalised media landscape. By comparing the leadership illustrations in these countries, it identifies both universal and culturally contingent leadership attributes, enriching the broader discourse on leadership perception and media framing. It calls for leadership frameworks aligned with cultural norms and media discourses.

**Keywords:** Implicit Leadership Theories, Cultural Leadership, Newspaper Media

## **Media Narratives of Leadership: A Decade of German Newspaper Discourse**

### **Introduction**

Implicit Leadership Theories (ILT) propose that individuals form cognitive leadership schemas based on cultural and societal assumptions (Eden & Leviatan, 1975). These implicit schemas interact with the perceptions, expectations, and decision-making processes in leadership contexts (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Media narratives play a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing these schemas by framing specific leadership attributes as effective or desirable (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Given the agenda-setting function of media, analysing its influence on leadership prototypes is important in order to understanding how societal leadership expectations are constructed. Therefore, the study of leadership should consider how leadership attributes are represented in mass media and how these images form leadership perceptions at an individual and collective level. Culturally Endorsed Implicit Leadership Theories (CLT), as introduced by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) Program (House et al., 2004), provides a structured framework for assessing leadership perceptions across different cultural contexts (Tung & Verbeke, 2010). However, leadership perceptions are also influenced by gender expectations (Role Congruity Theory, Eagly & Karau, 2002), ethical authenticity (Authentic Leadership, Avolio & Gardner, 2005), and transformational attributes (Burns, 2004; Northouse, 2021). Integrating these theories allows for a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in the media. The GLOBE Program has made a substantial contribution to leadership research by systematically analysing leadership prototypes across diverse national cultures. While there has been extensive research on leadership prototypes in organisational and cross-cultural settings (Den Hartog et al., 1999; Dorfman et al., 2012), relatively few studies have examined the role of mass media in constructing and reinforcing leadership narratives in a global, particularly in a European context. The present study addresses this research gap by systematically analysing leadership illustrations in German newspapers over a ten-year period. To provide a broader cross-cultural perspective, it integrates comparative results from British and American media images. This enables a more nuanced interpretation and understanding of leadership prototypes that dominate in Germany, how they align with German national cultural expectations, and identify universal or culture-specific patterns.

Newspapers are influential institutions that play an important role in mirroring the public discourse and shaping leadership perceptions. They engage in the selection and framing of narratives that reinforce societal values (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Through the selection of stories, the framing of narratives, and the language they use, newspapers help to construct an idealised or problematic image of leadership. These media-driven perceptions have real-world implications, influencing public trust in leaders, shaping organisational leadership expectations, and reinforcing cultural assumptions about what constitutes effective leadership (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2001). The German media landscape offers a unique case study for leadership discourse analysis due to its well-established and archived print media tradition each with its own editorial angle and ideological bias. Business-oriented newspapers, for instance, may emphasise Autonomous and Charismatic leadership traits, aligning with market-driven notions of leadership, whereas generalist and more sensationalist publications may offer less nuanced illustrations, focusing instead on individual personalities and controversies. Despite extensive research on leadership theories and their application, there is a gap in understanding how mass media constructs and supports leadership narratives. Existing research on leadership effectiveness (Avolio et al., 2009; Oc, 2018) has largely focused on organisational contexts, without addressing how leadership perceptions are influenced by media discourses. Furthermore, studies examining cross-cultural leadership differences (Den Hartog et al., 1999; Chhokar et al., 2007) have explored leadership prototypes in workplace settings, yet these have not systematically been applied to media. The present study offers interesting findings by systematically examining how leadership is portrayed in German newspapers, the frequency with which different leadership prototypes appear, and the cultural implications of these expressions. It contributes to the field by analysing which leadership attributes appear most frequently in German newspapers. The following research objectives have been specified:

- Extending leadership research by applying it to mass media narratives.
- Assessing preferences in leadership illustrations across different newspaper types.
- Identifying dominant leadership prototypes in German newspaper media and examining their alignment with cultural leadership expectations over a ten-year period in Germany.
- Exploring the cultural and societal implications of media-driven leadership representations reflecting and shaping implicit leadership theory and practice.

The study empirically investigates how German media illustrations of leadership reflect and shape cultural norms, reinforcing dominant leadership models while marginalising others. It is essential for scholars and policymakers in the fields of leadership and media studies to recognise and analyse these media-driven leadership patterns, so as to assess their impact on public trust, leadership legitimacy, and cultural leadership norms. Building on the theoretical foundation in the next chapter, the study explores:

- Which CLT dimensions are present in German daily newspaper articles?
- Which leadership prototypes are predominantly illustrated in the German media?
- What are the frequencies of these dimensions, and which newspapers prioritise them?
- How do media illustrations reflect, shape and reinforce cultural leadership expectations?
- What are the implications of these descriptions for leadership theory and practice?

Newspapers remain an important source of information, reaching millions of readers of a country's population. In Germany, national daily newspapers have a combined circulation of over 13.5 million copies per day, with 50% of the population regularly consuming print or online newspaper content (BDZV, 2024). Thus, media narratives play a significant role in shaping the public discourse. The extent to which leadership dimensions are represented in the German media provides insights into which leadership attributes are socially reinforced, and which are downplayed or contested. By analysing these representations, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of leadership prototypes in the media and their influence on cultural leadership expectations. The findings provide empirical evidence on how leadership is illustrated in German newspapers but also contributes to the ongoing discussions on the role of the media in the construction of leadership legitimacy, credibility and authority. Through a systematic analysis of leadership narratives, the study delivers empirical results into how the media construct, support or challenge perceptions of leadership in the public.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Implicit Leadership Theories (ILT) describe how individuals develop cognitive schemas that interact with expectations of leadership based on cultural exposure, social influences, and past experiences (Lord & Maher, 2002). These schemas interact dynamically with societal values, media narratives, and organisational norms, shaping leadership evaluations across different contexts (Eden & Leviatan, 1975). Cross-cultural research has demonstrated that leadership

expectations are not universal but are constructed through societal norms, values, and institutional structures (Dorfman et al., 2012). The GLOBE Program identified six global leadership dimensions: Charismatic/Value-Based, Team-Oriented, Participative, Humane-Oriented, Autonomous, and Self-Protective Leadership (House et al., 2004). These leadership prototypes vary across cultural clusters, reinforcing the argument that leadership is inherently contextual (Javidan et al., 2006). Western leadership paradigms often prioritise Charismatic and Participative Leadership (Chhokar et al., 2007). Conversely, Asian cultures may favour Self-Protective and Team-Oriented Leadership, mirroring high-context communication styles and hierarchical societal structures (Javidan et al., 2006). Cross-cultural media studies revealed that British and American media platforms tend to illustrate leadership in individualistic and transformational terms, reinforcing narratives of charismatic, visionary figures (Javidan et al., 2006). However, the German media predominantly emphasises institutional stability, pragmatic governance, and consensus-driven leadership, mirroring broader cultural preferences for structured decision-making and collective responsibility (Reinmann et al., 2019). Charismatic Leadership, as outlined by Northouse (2021), can be further divided into transformational and transactional Leadership. Transformational leaders inspire through vision and ethical values, whereas transactional leaders focus on structured rewards and performance expectations (Burns, 2004; Scandura & Dorfman, 2004). Media illustrations generally tend to favour transformational leadership, reinforcing narratives of visionary and ethically inspired leadership (Burns, 2004; Scandura & Dorfman, 2004). Transactional leadership, in contrast, is often characterised as bureaucratic and static, despite its role in effective organisational management (Northouse, 2021). This framing in the media contributes to shifting perceptions in times of crisis (Junker et al., 2011). Additionally, Eagly and Karau's (2002) research on gender differences in ILT emphasises how stereotypes mirror the perception of male and female leaders differently across cultures. Eagly & Karau's (2002) Role Congruity Theory posits that female leaders mostly encounter a double standard in leadership evaluations due to conflicting societal expectations regarding communal and agentic traits. This phenomenon is particularly evident in media illustrations, where female leaders are subject to heightened scrutiny (Koenig et al., 2011). These gendered leadership expectations serve to strengthen traditional norms, which often restrict the visibility and credibility of female leaders in specific cultural contexts. ILT interact with media narratives in shaping leadership perceptions, as media discourse serves as a reinforcing agent of existing leadership prototypes (Koenig et al., 2011). Recent scholars have emphasised the dynamic nature of ILT in response to social and technological shifts. For

instance, the implicit leadership expectations of different generations have been shown to vary in their preferences for different forms of leadership (Kwiecińska et al., 2023). This evolving nature of ILT indicates that leadership perceptions adapt to changing social, technological, and economic conditions. Avolio and Gardner (2005) argue that digitalisation has contributed to the democratisation of leadership expectations, enabling a more participative model in contrast to traditionally hierarchical structures (Wang et al., 2022). Studies by Shondrick et al. (2010) indicate that ILT evolve in response to cultural shifts and crisis events. These shifts emphasise the need to integrate media theories into ILT frameworks, as societal and digital leadership narratives increasingly influence public and organisational leadership expectations. Leaders who embody transformational attributes during uncertain times may experience enhanced public approval, whereas those who fail to align with implicit leadership expectations may struggle with legitimacy. This is particularly evident in global leadership situations, where cultural and contextual differences impact how leaders are perceived (Osland, 2017).

#### Cultural Values and Leadership Prototypes Across Contexts

Cultural values have been demonstrated to exert a significant influence on the construction of leadership expectations and the acceptance of different leadership styles. Hofstede's dimensions of national culture, including power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, and long-term orientation, have been shown to influence how leadership is perceived. His research revealed that societies with high power distance may favour leadership styles that are autonomous and self-protective, while those with lower power distance may prefer leadership styles that are participative and team oriented. Cultural values influence not only the behaviour of leaders but also the manner in which they are evaluated. In high-context cultures, leadership is characterised by indirect communication, group harmony, and situational adaptability (Kim et al., 1998; Würtz, 2005). In contrast, low-context cultures, such as those found in the United States and Germany, value direct communication, individual initiative, and decisiveness (Kim et al., 1998; Würtz, 2005). The evolution of cultural leadership values has led to an increased emphasis on inclusive and ethical leadership models (Würtz, 2005). Research by Maier and Ravazzani (2019) underlines the growing importance of ethical decision-making and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in leadership evaluations across different cultural contexts, a shift that is particularly prominent in Western societies, where ethical leadership is becoming a key determinant of leader legitimacy and organisational success. As globalisation reshapes leadership expectations, hybrid leadership models that

integrate multiple cultural influences have emerged. Stahl et al. (2017) theorised that leaders who combine elements of charismatic, participative, and humane-oriented leadership styles are more effective in multicultural settings. Moreover, technological advancements, including artificial intelligence (AI) and digital transformation, are reshaping leadership perceptions by shifting expectations from human-driven expertise. The GLOBE Program developed a framework for understanding how leadership is perceived across cultures, providing a systematic approach to identifying leadership attributes across different contexts (**Table 2.1**).

**Table 4.1: GLOBE Cultural Competencies**

<b>1.</b>	<b>Performance Orientation</b>	Degree to which a collective encourages and rewards (should encourage/reward) group members for performance improvement and excellence.
<b>2.</b>	<b>Assertiveness</b>	Degree to which individuals are (should be) assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their relationship with others.
<b>3.</b>	<b>Future Orientation</b>	Extent to which individuals engage (should engage) in future-oriented behaviours like planning, investing in the future, delaying gratification.
<b>4.</b>	<b>Humane Orientation</b>	Degree to which a collective encourages and rewards (should encourage/reward) individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring, kind to others.
<b>5.</b>	<b>Institutional Collectivism</b>	Degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices, encourage and reward (should encourage/reward) collective distribution of resources and collective action.
<b>6.</b>	<b>In-Group Collectivism</b>	Degree to which individuals express (should express) pride, loyalty, cohesiveness in their organizations or families.
<b>7.</b>	<b>Gender Egalitarianism</b>	Degree to which a collective minimises (should minimise) gender inequality.
<b>8.</b>	<b>Power Distance</b>	Extent to which the community accepts and endorses authority, power differences, and status privileges.
<b>9.</b>	<b>Uncertainty Avoidance</b>	Extent to which a society, organisation, or group relies (and should rely) on social norms, rules, and procedures to alleviate the unpredictability of future events. The greater the desire to avoid uncertainty, the more people seek orderliness, consistency, structure, formal procedures, and laws.

Source: Adapted from GLOBE, 2004.

The understanding of cultural attributes can enhance the precision of cross-cultural leadership comparisons (Stahl et al., 2017), thereby reinforcing the importance of contextual adaptation in leadership assessments. These findings can inform leadership development programs, global talent management, and international communication strategies, assuring culturally adaptive leadership models. The effectiveness of leadership depends on contextual factors. Fiedler's (1972) Contingency Model proposes that leadership outcomes are formed by task structure, leader-member relations, and situational control. This theoretical framework is highly relevant for media portrayals, as certain leadership styles are favoured in different situational contexts (e.g. crisis vs. stability). Goleman (1998) introduced the concept of Emotional Intelligence as a key predictor of leadership effectiveness. Leadership manifestations in the media frequently accentuate attributes such as empathy, adaptability, and self-regulation, reinforcing the notion that effective leaders must possess emotional competence (Treem et al., 2021). The framework further supports the argument that leadership expectations are dynamic and evolving, requiring constant adaptation by global leaders to align with cultural and organisational norms. Recent studies have accentuated how gender egalitarianism is increasingly influencing leadership prototypes, particularly in Western societies where female leadership representations are growing. Furthermore, uncertainty avoidance has been demonstrated to influence leadership during crises, with high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures tending to favour structured decision-making and risk mitigation strategies (House et al., 2013). This underlines the importance of cultural adaptability in leadership research and practice, suggesting that future research should examine how these leadership dimensions evolve in response to global trends such as digitalisation and international mobility. Further studies are required to assess how AI-driven leadership models interact with culturally established leadership expectations. As organisations become increasingly global, understanding cultural adaptability will remain critical.

#### The Role of Media in Shaping Leadership Perceptions

Media platforms play an important role in shaping leadership perceptions by influencing the public opinion, reinforcing societal expectations, and framing leadership narratives (Auvinen et al., 2019). The agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) explains that media channels do not merely report events but actively frame the importance of issues, including the expression of leadership. In the context of Germany, media narratives reflect both cultural leadership norms and broader societal debates about power, governance, and leadership effectiveness (Müller, 2018). The diversity of Germany's media landscape, encompassing both

business-focused newspapers and general-interest publications, including tabloids, offers a multifaceted perspective on leadership. Business-oriented newspapers, such as *Handelsblatt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (F.A.Z.)*, are known to emphasise Autonomous and charismatic leadership styles, mostly portraying corporate executives and political figures as strategic, visionary, and decisive (Reinemann et al., 2019). However, general-interest newspapers, such as *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, offer a contrasting perspective. These publications often frame leadership through the framework of ethical responsibility, inclusivity, and transparency, placing greater emphasis on Participative and humane-Oriented leadership models (Hunt, 2017). Sensationalist tabloids, such as *Bild*, mostly construct leadership narratives based on directive and self-protective leadership traits, portraying political and business leaders in polarised or scandal-driven contexts (Dziuda & Howell, 2021). Burns (2004) differentiated between transformational and transactional leadership, arguing that transformational leaders focus on vision and ethical inspiration, while transactional leaders rely on structured exchanges. Media expressions tend to favour transformational leadership, reinforcing narratives of visionary, ethically driven, and charismatic leadership (Burns, 2004; Scandura & Dorfman, 2004). In contrast, transactional leadership is often illustrated as bureaucratic and rigid, despite its essential role in structured decision-making and crisis management (Northouse, 2021). This particular framing does not only influence the public expectations of leadership, but it also evolves in response to societal crises, where the demand for decisive, authoritative figures often intensifies (Junker et al., 2011). The tendency is consistent with ILT, as the public often seeks stability in leadership figures during periods of uncertainty (Koenig et al., 2011). An illustration of this phenomenon is the way in which the German media portrayed Chancellor Angela Merkel during the COVID-19 crisis, with her scientific and data-driven crisis management approach being seen as an ideal leadership response (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023). However, Maier and Ravazzani (2019) emphasise that ethical leadership and corporate social responsibility have become fundamental in contemporary models of leadership. Media narratives scrutinise ethical failures to a greater extent, thereby reinforcing public expectations for transparency and integrity (Northouse, 2021). According to Tewksbury and Scheufele's (2019) news framing theory, media channels highlight or neglect certain leadership traits, thereby reinforcing bias and shaping public perceptions. Comparative studies show that charismatic and visionary leaders receive greater prominence in Anglo-America, whereas the German media place much stronger emphasis on pragmatic, institutional, and consensus-driven approaches (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

The increasing dominance of social media and digital journalism has transformed leadership communication, making it more direct, interactive, and, at times, populist (Treem et al., 2021). Unlike traditional news media, social media platforms enable leaders to control their own narratives, bypassing journalistic framing (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Research on mediated leadership (Fakhreddin, 2025) argues that contemporary leaders, particularly in politics, utilise Twitter, YouTube, and other social platforms to craft personalised and populist leadership personas. In Germany, political and corporate leaders are increasingly leveraging digital platforms to engage with audiences. However, this trend raises concerns about polarisation and credibility, as leaders who successfully utilise direct communication strategies may gain influence regardless of their actual competencies (Treem et al., 2021). This phenomenon demonstrates a shift in leadership perception formation, where authenticity, relatability, and responsiveness often outweigh traditional leadership qualifications in digital discourse. The globalisation of leadership narratives through digital media provides a unique opportunity to make cross-cultural comparisons. While German leadership prototypes are historically rooted in rationality, pragmatism and institutional stability, increased exposure to leadership styles from Anglo-American and Asian countries in digital media is influencing domestic leadership expectations (Scandura & Dorfman, 2004). Cross-cultural research shows that leadership images differ significantly depending on national media norms and cultural expectations. Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions, particularly Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance, exert a significant influence on the portrayal of leadership in the media. In cultures characterised by high power distance (e.g., France), authoritative leaders are more positively described, whereas participative leadership is emphasised in cultures exhibiting lower power distance, such as Germany. In the United States, leadership narratives are frequently characterised by an emphasis on individualism and transformation, with a focus on charismatic and inspirational figures (Northouse, 2021). In contrast, Asian media platforms commonly propagate collectivist and hierarchical leadership models, emphasising team-oriented and strategic leadership approaches with a focus on the long term (Keuscher & Vergossen, 2024). However, German media images tend to balance charisma with institutional responsibility, reproducing a preference for structured, methodical, and ethically sound leadership models (Reinemann et al., 2019). This underscores the importance of culture in media expressions and highlights how national values shape leadership expectations. Further research should explore how the media continues to influence leadership models.

The theoretical foundation outlined in this chapter establishes a comprehensive framework for integrating ILT, leadership prototypes, cultural value dimensions, and media representations. Each of these components contributes to a holistic model of leadership perception, reinforcing the argument that leadership is a socially constructed and contextually phenomenon. ILT highlight how individuals develop cognitive leadership prototypes based on societal norms and personal experiences. These expectations influence leadership evaluations across different cultural and medial contexts (Lord & Maher, 2002). However, ILT alone do not fully explain variations in leadership perception, demanding the integration of cultural dimensions and media framing theories to provide a more nuanced understanding (Tung & Verbeke, 2010). Cultural values, further refine leadership prototypes by demonstrating how leadership expectations vary across societies. CLT serves as a methodological foundation for understanding how societal preferences influence the acceptance of specific leadership attributes. Societies with high power distance tend to endorse directive leadership styles, while those with egalitarian cultures favour participative leadership models (House et al., 2004). These dimensions provide a systematic approach for categorising leadership expectations in cross-cultural settings and form the foundation for the methodology of this study. The role of media images in constructing leadership narratives further demonstrates how leadership perceptions are supported or challenged. Media framing and agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) construct the public understanding of leadership, emphasising specific traits and leadership prototypes depending on political, economic, or cultural contexts. The increasing digitalisation of leadership communication further complicates leadership evaluation, as leaders actively participate in shaping their own narratives through social media and direct digital engagement. CLT categorises leadership attributes based on how societies endorse or reject specific leadership traits. This approach enhances the cross-cultural validity of leadership prototype analysis by systematically identifying variations in leadership perception across media images. The following chapter is going to operationalise these insights through the integration of CLT as a methodological and structured framework.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach was based on a systematic and quantitative content analysis, characterised by a structured and objective nature, grounded in theoretical frameworks and assuring comparability, replicability and structural clarity (Saunders, 2009). The study followed a positivist-functionalist paradigm, assuming that media portrayals of leadership were external

and measurable realities which can be analysed using quantitative methods. It applied deductive reasoning and examined long-term trends in media leadership representations over a ten-year period (2009–2019). The timeframe allowed for the identification of stability, or development, about how leadership was constructed and perceived in the public discourse. To reach a representative coverage, the study examined six national daily newspapers, selected based on their readership, editorial diversity, and data availability in German newspaper archives. The exclusion of weekly newspapers ensured a consistent media coverage over the ten-year period, while the selection of newspapers with a large readership made sure that the findings reproduce the leadership descriptions of the population. The sample included business-focused, general-interest, and sensationalist newspapers, allowing for a contrasting expression of leadership prototypes. Only newspapers with full-text archives were included, enabling the measurement of leadership discourses without direct interaction with the media (Pedersen et al., 2025).

**Table 4.2: Overview of the German Daily Newspaper Sample**

No.	Daily Newspaper	Database	Timeframe	Newspaper Type
1.	Bild	Wiso <sup>1</sup>	1.1.2009-31.12.2019	Sensationalist
2.	Süddeutsche Zeitung	FI LibraryNet <sup>2</sup>	1.1.2009-31.12.2019	General Interest (Left-Centre)
3.	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	F.A.Z. Archive <sup>3</sup>	1.1.2009-31.12.2019	General Interest (Right-Centre)
4.	Die Welt	Genios <sup>4</sup>	1.1.2009-31.12.2019	Conservative
5.	Das Handelsblatt	Genios <sup>5</sup>	1.1.2009-31.12.2019	Business-Focused
6.	<b>Total</b>	–	<b>10 Years</b>	<b>Balanced</b>

**Source: Author**

<sup>1</sup> WISO: Online database for science. Over 21 million references, 17 million full texts from over 770 specialist journals, more than 230 million articles from the daily and weekly press, 88 million company information, 15 million personal information, 1 million market data, approx. 12,000 electronic books.

<sup>2</sup> FI LibraryNet: Exclusively all articles in the Süddeutsche Zeitung since 1992.

<sup>3</sup> F.A.Z. Archive: Exclusively all articles in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung since 1949.

<sup>4,5</sup> GENIOS: GBI-Genios Deutsche Wirtschaftsdatenbank GmbH is a commercial provider (host) of electronic press, company and business information in full text.

The prototype dimensions were classified to ensure cross-cultural validation in the methodology. Each newspaper article was systematically coded for explicit leadership references corresponding to implicit leadership dimensions that were endorsed by the respective culture. The study applied Boolean search operators, allowing for a precise and consistent classification. This approach assured consistency during the identification of relevant leadership illustrations across all newspapers. **Table 3.2** outlines the CLT dimensions, and their corresponding keywords used in the analysis. Computer-assisted keyword searches efficiently identified the media descriptions while maintaining a systematic classification consistency.

**Table 4.3: GLOBE CLT Dimensions and German Search Keywords**

No.	CLT Dimension	Definition	German Keywords
1.	Charismatic/Value-Based Leadership	Inspires, motivates, and promotes high performance through core values.	(Führungskraft ODER Manager) UND (visionär ODER inspirierend ODER integer ODER leistungsorientiert)
2.	Team-Oriented Leadership	Focuses on collaboration, diplomacy, and administrative competence.	(Führungskraft ODER Manager) UND (kollaborativ ODER Teamspieler ODER diplomatisch ODER administrativ ODER kompetent)
3.	Participative Leadership	Encourages shared decision-making and inclusivity.	(Führungskraft ODER Manager) UND (partizipativ ODER demokratisch)
4.	Humane-Oriented Leadership	Supportive, considerate leadership with compassion and generosity: (a) modesty (b) humane orientation.	(Führungskraft ODER Manager) UND (bescheiden ODER human)
5.	Autonomous Leadership	Emphasizes independence and self-reliance.	(Führungskraft ODER Manager) UND (autonom ODER eigenständig ODER unabhängig ODER einzigartig)
6.	Self-Protective Leadership	Ensures status, security, and group safety.	(Führungskraft ODER Manager) UND (egozentrisch ODER statusbewusst ODER konfliktverursachend ODER gesichtswahrend ODER prozedural)

**Source: Adapted from GLOBE, 2006.**

To achieve methodological rigour during the data processing and coding procedure, the study adhered to an established coding protocol adapted from Bartlett & Vavrus (2016) (**Table 3.3**),

which guaranteed consistency and reliability in the categorisation of leadership prototypes across various media sources. To strengthen the methodological robustness, the following multiple validity and reliability measures were implemented.

**Table 4.4: Quantitative Content Analysis Process Model**

No.	Process Phase	Key Question
1.	Conceptualisation	What phenomenon is being studied?
2.	Theory Review	What does previous research suggest?
3.	Research Questions	How will the study address gaps?
4.	Content Definition	What media content is relevant?
5.	Sampling Strategy	How is the data selected?
6.	Coding & Categorisation	How are leadership prototypes classified?

**Source: Adapted from Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016.**

With the aim of establishing external validity, the study evaluated whether media representations of leadership correlated with societal leadership expectations. The semantic reliability test, based on Krippendorff's (2011) guidelines, was sensitive to symbolic meanings. To enhance the methodological accuracy, the coding protocol was pilot tested, followed by an independent re-testing. A random sample of 50 articles was analysed to verify the inter-coder reliability, achieving an accuracy rate of 96%, confirming the consistency and reproducibility of the classification process. The pilot study helped to refine the coding framework and to make sure that the subjectivity in the categorisation was minimised, and consistent coding criteria were applied across the entire dataset. The study analysed the contemporary newspaper reach and audience quotas to estimate how leadership narratives might have influenced the public opinion, which was crucial for understanding the impact of media on the public opinion of leadership , and minimise sampling bias . By analysing widely circulated national newspapers, the leadership representations reflected the public discourse (**Table 3.4**).

**Table 4.5: Reach and Quotas of German Newspaper Sample**

No.	Newspaper	Reach (million) 2024 → (2023)	Quota 2024 → (2023)
1.	Bild	23.21 → (25.79)	0,49 → (0,49)
2.	Süddeutsche Zeitung	8.03 → (8.33)	0,16 → (0,17)
3.	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	6.94 → (7.24)	0,13 → (0,14)
4.	Die Welt	5.85 → (5.92)	0,12 → (0,12)
5.	Handelsblatt	3.67 → (3.51)	0,10 → (0,08)
6.	<b>Total</b>	<b>47.70 → (50.79)</b>	<b>1,0 (1,0)</b>

Source: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2024.

### 1. External Validity

- By selecting major national newspapers, the analysis increased the generalisability of the findings and confirmed that the results were reflective, broader, national leadership representations rather than medial niche illustrations.
- The application of the GLOBE CLT framework made sure that the comparability of the study's findings with those of established cross-cultural leadership research was possible, thereby enhancing the study's relevance across diverse cultural contexts and media landscapes.

### 2. Reliability Measures

- The inter-coder reliability was measured using Krippendorff's (2011) Alpha ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), which is widely regarded as a reliable measure of consistency between coders. This approach was adopted to enhance the credibility of the data categorisation process.
- In order to establish face validity and take care of the categories used, it was necessary to confirm that they were appropriate and aligned with the study's objectives. In order to achieve this, expert reviews were conducted (Kemper, 2020).
- The study incorporated triangulation with previous leadership content analyses (Wimmer & Dominik, 2011), which enabled more comprehensive validation of the coding system and established consistency in the interpretations.

### *3. Predictive and Construct Validity*

- The study then compared its findings with those of existing leadership perception studies to test for consistency, confirming that the media descriptions were aligned with existing research.
- Finally, the study tested whether the leadership descriptions in the German media were aligned with the expected leadership attributes defined within the CLT framework for Germany, thereby providing an additional layer of validity to the results.

### **Results**

With 13.52 million, daily newspapers remain one of the most influential sources of information and discourse in Germany. A total of 327 newspapers with 1,452 local editions are published every day, alongside 17 weekly newspapers (1.61 million copies) and six Sunday newspapers (1.74 million copies) (BDZV e.V., 2024). In 2024, daily newspapers reached more than 50% of the German population, meaning that more than 40 million people read at least one newspaper per day (AWA, 2024). The analysis revealed that Bild had the highest readership with 23.21 million, followed by Süddeutsche Zeitung (8.03), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (6.94), Die Welt (5.85), and Handelsblatt (3.67). The quotas below represent each newspaper's proportion of the total readership, mirroring their relative influence. Bild accounts for almost half of the readership (49%), while Handelsblatt, as a specialised business newspaper, has a smaller but influential readership. A total of 281,598 newspaper articles was examined, of which 2,846 articles (10%) explicitly referenced CLT dimensions (**Table 4.1**).

**Table 4.6: CLT Distribution Across German Newspapers 2009-2019**

Newspaper	F.A.Z. 118,147		Handelsblatt 15,188		Die Welt 17,377		Süddeutsche 24,425		BILD 106,452		Total 281,598
	No.	Rank	No.	Rank	No.	Rank	No.	Rank	No.	Rank	SUM
Autonomous Leadership	634	1.	397	2.	132	3.	105	4.	38	5.	<b>1,306</b> 45.9%
Humane-oriented Leadership	323	1.	135	2.	57	3.	48	4.	35	5.	<b>598</b> 21.0%
Charismatic value-based Leadership	172	1.	105	2.	37	4.	87	3.	20	5.	<b>421</b> 14.8%
Participative Leadership	244	1.	78	2.	56	3.	20	4.	1	5.	<b>399</b> 14.0%
Team-oriented Leadership	59	1.	25	2.	16	3.	6	4.	4	5.	<b>110</b> 3.9%
Self-protected Leadership	5	1.	1	2.	1	2.	5	1.	0	3.	<b>12</b> 0.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,437</b>		<b>741</b>		<b>299</b>		<b>271</b>		<b>98</b>		<b>2,846</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>50%</b>		<b>26%</b>		<b>11%</b>		<b>10%</b>		<b>3%</b>		<b>100%</b>
Quota	0.14		0.08		0.12		0.17		0.49		1.0
Weight	201.88		59.28		35.88		46.07		48.02		/
<b>Rank</b>	<b>1.</b>		<b>2.</b>		<b>5.</b>		<b>4.</b>		<b>3.</b>		/

**Source: Author.**

Autonomous Leadership (46%) and Humane-Oriented Leadership (21%) dominated the media coverage, collectively accounting for 67% of all leadership descriptions in Germany.

- Autonomous Leadership is characterised by independent, self-reliant and individualistic leadership, which is in line with Germany's cultural preference for self-directed decision-makers. The frequency (46%) indicated that German media plays a central role in shaping and reflecting leadership legitimacy by consistently amplifying narratives that prioritise individual authority over collective decision-making. This framing was

consistent with Germany's broader leadership culture, valuing self-reliance, strategic autonomy, and task-oriented leadership.

- Humane-Oriented Leadership is defined by its supportive, considerate and ethical nature, reproducing an increasing emphasis on empathy and social responsibility. The study demonstrated that the German media favours leadership styles that balance authority and ethical responsibility.
- The findings indicate that German media narratives predominantly favoured leaders who demonstrate both independence and compassion, aligning with broader societal expectations.

Charismatic/Value-Based Leadership (15%) and Participative Leadership (14%) were the next most frequently mentioned leadership dimensions in Germany.

- Charismatic/Value-Based Leadership emphasises leaders who inspire, motivate, and value high performance, and maintain strong ethical core values.
- Participative Leadership focuses on collaborative decision-making, reinforcing the importance of inclusivity and shared governance in leadership discussions.
- These dimensions expressed that media narratives acknowledged the role of visionary leadership and democratic engagement, though to a lesser extent than individualistic and humane attributes.

Team-Oriented Leadership (4%) and Self-Protective Leadership (0.4%) least represented.

- Team-Oriented Leadership, emphasising collaboration and group cohesion, appeared in 110 articles, indicating a low emphasis on collective leadership in German media discourses.
- Self-Protective Leadership, which focuses on face-saving, conflict avoidance, and status preservation, was almost entirely absent (12 articles, 0.4%), indicating that German leadership narratives did not prioritise hierarchical or defensive leadership styles.
- The results suggest that the German media favoured leadership styles that balance individual autonomy with ethical responsibility, while hierarchical and team-based leadership models received significantly less attention.

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) and Handelsblatt

- Together, business-oriented newspapers accounted for 76% of all leadership-related coverage.

- They predominantly highlighted Autonomous Leadership (634 and 397 articles, respectively), aligning with their readerships' focus on economic and political independence.
- They also placed strong emphasis on Charismatic and Humane-Oriented Leadership, mirroring their interest in ethical corporate leadership and visionary economic figures.

Süddeutsche Zeitung and Die Welt

- General-interest newspapers provided a more balanced image of leadership prototypes.
- They featured a relatively higher proportion of Participative Leadership references (14%), expressing an editorial preference for democratic decision-making.
- Their moderate emphasis on charismatic leadership was consistent with centralist political interests that value visionary leadership while maintaining institutional stability.

Bild Zeitung

- The sensationalist tabloid contained the fewest leadership-related articles (98 out of 2,846, 3%).
- Bild primarily focused on Autonomous Leadership (38 articles) and Humane-Oriented Leadership (35 articles), reproducing its preference for individualistic leaders who exhibit strong personalities and emotional appeal.
- The absence of other leadership traits showed that Bild prioritised strong, independent figures over collaborative decision-makers. This editorial framing aligns with populist media strategies, which favour personality-driven leadership models that emphasise direct action, strong rhetoric, and decisive authority. This illustration reinforces leadership as an individualistic rather than collective process, resonating with a tabloid's readership demographics.

## **Discussion**

The study analysed how leadership prototypes were represented in the German media and assessed their impact on mirroring and shaping the public expectations of leadership. The results revealed a strong preference for leadership styles that balance decisiveness with ethical responsibility, as evidenced by Autonomous (46%) and Humane-Oriented (21%) Leadership representing 67% of all descriptions. The results provide insights for CLT, emphasising the role of media as a key influencer in leadership perception. The analysis also indicates that the German media reflects and constructs public leadership expectations by reinforcing a dual

leadership ideal – one that integrates autonomous decision-making with ethical responsibility. The emphasis on Autonomous Leadership (46%) aligns with Germany's high individualism and low power distance, as previously identified in Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2011). The German media frequently portrays leaders as self-reliant, decisive, and goal-oriented, reflecting societal expectations of leadership effectiveness. However, the strong appearance of Humane-Oriented Leadership (21%) demonstrated that leadership is not solely viewed through the lens of individualism and independence, but also incorporates a growing emphasis on empathy, social responsibility, and ethical behaviour. This dual expectation demonstrates that German leadership values both, assertiveness and compassion, considering shifts towards human-centred leadership paradigms (Meyer et al., 2019). Charismatic/Value-Based Leadership (15%) and Participative Leadership (14%) further support an evolving leadership paradigm in Germany, emphasising visionary and inspiring leadership qualities, often associated with transformational leadership models (Bass, 1990). Participative leadership, which encourages collaborative decision-making, is in line with the growing focus in contemporary leadership research on inclusive leadership approaches (Bolden et al., 2023). The moderate representation of team-oriented leadership (4%) and self-protective leadership (0.4%) indicates that German media narratives place less emphasis on collective and status-preserving leadership styles. This media framing has the potential to reinforce public expectations that leadership effectiveness is prioritised by individual agency rather than by collaborative decision-making or hierarchical authority (Rice, 2018). This is in line with Germany's broader leadership culture, which favours self-reliant yet ethical leadership models (House et al., 2013). The emphasis on autonomous leadership corresponds with Germany's low power distance and high individualism, as already identified in Hofstede's cultural dimensions. At the same time, humane-oriented leadership reflects an increasing societal expectation for ethical leadership, corporate social responsibility, and workplace inclusivity (Maier & Ravazzani, 2019). The study confirms that German newspapers frame leadership through the lens of autonomy, ethical responsibility, and charisma, while collaborative and hierarchical leadership styles receive less coverage and reveals that business-oriented newspapers favour independent and charismatic leaders, while general-interest newspapers emphasise participative and humane leadership.

While this study focused on German newspaper coverage, its findings are also relevant to understanding how the media constructs leadership norms across different cultural contexts. The expressions of Autonomous and Humane-Oriented Leadership in Germany expresses a

unique combination of individualistic and ethical leadership expectations. However, leadership prototypes vary significantly across different cultural contexts. In high power distance cultures such as China and Russia, leadership descriptions tend to emphasise hierarchical, directive and status-conscious leadership styles, reinforcing the expectation that authority is derived from positional power rather than individual performance (Brodbeck et al., 2002). In contrast, leadership discourses in low power distance countries such as the Nordic states prioritise consensus-building and participative leadership models. Germany's media narratives combine elements of both autonomy and ethical responsibility, indicating a hybrid approach – rooted in individual performance yet increasingly valuing social responsibility as a leadership trait. In contrast, Nordic countries, which also have low power distance and high individualism, tend to favour participative leadership models, highlighting collaborative decision-making and consensus-building as key leadership attributes (Dinçer, 2021). These differences underline the importance of contextualising leadership theories within specific cultural frameworks. The predominance of Autonomous Leadership in German media is influenced by historical and economic factors, including Germany's emphasis on technical expertise, efficiency, and structured decision-making (Berger, 2019). The increasing prominence of Humane-Oriented Leadership reveals a shift towards more inclusive and socially responsible leadership narratives, reflecting global trends towards ethical leadership and sustainability (Keuscher & Vergossen, 2024). The increasing use of AI-driven and digital leadership models, and hybrid work environments may further reshape leadership expectations and manifestations (Ly, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The study's focus on German newspapers limits the generalisability of its findings to other cultural contexts (Barmeyer et al., 2019) and further research should be conducted to examine how the interaction between leadership and the media varies globally. The study analyses six major national newspapers, but does not include regional media, platforms, social media or television narratives. Further research is therefore encouraged to expand the study to include digital platforms, television and social media to capture a more holistic picture of leadership expressions and their public impact (Iacus et al., 2020). Given the specific context of crisis leadership, which is characterised by specific leadership conditions (Wu et al., 2021; Forster et al., 2020), this study examined a fixed 10-year dataset from 2009-2019. Hence, further research should examine how leadership prototypes shift during crises in response to industry-specific transformations or broader socio-political disruptions (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). The

present study investigates leadership illustrations in the media; however, it does not assess the extent to which these leadership portrayals translate into leadership effectiveness. Further studies could examine the impact of media endorsed leadership traits on actual leadership effectiveness and organisational success (Sertel et al., 2022).

However, newspapers are an important medium for interacting with public perceptions. However, the extent to which they support certain leadership prototypes, challenge traditional leadership expectations, or introduce alternative narratives, remains underexplored. This study systematically examines how different newspaper genres influence the leadership discourse in Germany, and whether these media expressions align with or deviate from established societal leadership norms. The distribution of leadership prototypes across newspapers reflected editorial priorities and audience preferences, shaping how leadership was framed and emphasised in each publication. The findings strengthen the idea that leadership expectations are culturally specific and reinforced by media portrayals, which has been previously explored in cross-cultural leadership studies (Brodbeck et al., 2002). The emphasis on Autonomous and Charismatic Leadership over participative or hierarchical frameworks was consistent with Germany's high individualism and low power distance and suggested that media narratives support a leadership ideal that conforms to cultural expectations while marginalising alternative models. The increasing representation of Humane-oriented Leadership signals a shift towards ethical and socially responsible leadership paradigms. A considerable key finding of the study is that leadership legitimacy is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by media influence. The role of the media in supporting or challenging societal norms of leadership in the public is demonstrated, as the media reflect and shape public perceptions, thereby influencing which leadership traits are considered legitimate. Furthermore, the study shows how leadership is socially constructed, thereby justifying its hegemonic and conceptual structure. A practical recommendation is that German leadership development programmes should focus on cultivating a balance between independent decision-making and ethical responsibility. The findings suggest that German leaders who can demonstrate both strategic autonomy and social empathy may gain more public trust and legitimacy. The dominance of Autonomous and Human-oriented Leadership in the German media reflects a dual expectation of leaders to be both independent and ethically responsible. The presence of Charismatic/Value-Based and Participative Leadership in German media narratives emphasises that leadership training should include inspirational communication, ethical decision-making and inclusive

leadership practices, in line with contemporary ethical and inclusive leadership expectations. The study contributes to the advancement of ILT and CLT by demonstrating that leadership prototypes are dynamic constructs that are reinforced by media discourses rather than being culturally predetermined. It emphasises the crucial role of the media in reflecting, shaping, reinforcing or challenging culturally endorsed implicit leadership attributes while reproducing or constructing leadership paradigms over time (Table 6.1).

**Table 6.1: Leadership Prototypes in German Newspapers 2009–2019**

No.	Prototype	Definition	Percentage	Key Newspapers
1.	Autonomous Leadership	Independent, goal-oriented, self-reliant decision-making	46%	F.A.Z, Handelsblatt
2.	Humane-Oriented Leadership	Ethical, compassionate, socially responsible leadership	21%	F.A.Z, Süddeutsche Zeitung
3.	Charismatic/Value-Based Leadership	Visionary, inspiring, strong ethical values	15%	F.A.Z, Handelsblatt, Die Welt
4.	Participative Leadership	Inclusive, collaborative decision-making	14%	Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt
5.	Team-Oriented Leadership	Emphasis on teamwork, cohesion, collective goals	4%	FAZ, Handelsblatt
6.	Self-Protective Leadership	Status-conscious, hierarchical, defensive leadership	0.4%	No significant representation

**Source: Author.**

The findings of this study underline that leadership theories should integrate media influence and regional variations as key variables in leadership frameworks. The understanding of media narratives can help leadership scholars, educators and practitioners to navigate public expectations and perceptions more effectively. It is crucial for leadership communication strategies to consider how different media platforms frame leadership attributes, allowing leaders to adapt their messaging, public image, and leadership styles in order to resonate with societal expectations. Further research should explore the impact of digital media, social media, regional leadership narratives and globalisation on leadership perceptions. A deeper understanding of these dynamics would be essential for developing innovative leadership frameworks. The study also provides evidence of editorial preferences in how the different

newspapers frame leadership. The analysis showed that business-oriented newspapers tended to favour Autonomous and Charismatic Leadership, aligning with their readership's preference for strategic, visionary, and performance-driven leadership models (Ernst et al., 2022). In contrast, general-interest newspapers provided a more balanced image of leadership prototypes. This implies an editorial preference for democratic and collaborative leadership approaches, aligning with their broader audience's expectations of governance and leadership effectiveness. Tabloid newspapers tended to mirror sensationalist reporting rather than in-depth leadership analysis. The absence of Self-protective Leadership across all newspapers indicates that hierarchical, status-driven leadership styles are not prominently featured in German media narratives, reinforcing the country's preference for egalitarian leadership models (Lang & Keuscher, 2020). The media's tendency to emphasise certain leadership styles over others underlines the importance of critical media awareness. The findings of the study support that traditional frameworks should integrate media influence as an important factor in shaping leadership perceptions. A proposed model for further research should consider the interaction between cultural values, media narratives and leadership prototypes. Such a model should consider that leadership prototypes are not only culturally determined but also influenced by media discourse and organisational contexts. Further research could empirically test such a model across other countries and industries to refine an integrative cross-cultural leadership framework. This study contributes to theoretical and practical discussions on implicit leadership prototypes, cultural influence and media discourse. The results indicate that autonomous and people-oriented leadership traits are the most dominant leadership prototypes in German print media, reinforcing public expectations of self-reliant yet ethically responsible leadership. Further research should focus on cross-cultural leadership comparisons between different countries, the influence of print media on leadership legitimacy, and the evolution of leadership perceptions over time. Incorporating digital and social media into leadership research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary leadership frameworks. By extending leadership theories to account for media influence, the research paves the way for a more integrated understanding of how leadership prototypes are constructed, reinforced and adapted in global, cultural and organisational settings. For Germany, the findings recommend that leadership development programs should focus on a balance between independence and ethical responsibility, reproducing societal expectations. Given the media's emphasis on leadership, leadership development programs should prioritise training in inspirational communication, strategic vision, and inclusive decision-making. However, understanding how

media narratives interact with leadership perceptions can help leaders to manage public expectations (Jian, 2022). However, leaders should be aware of the dominant leadership discourses and how they influence public image, especially as digital and social media play an increasing role in leadership legitimacy (Makridakis, 2017).

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