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Implementing the Concept of Sustainable Development in an Organisation and Leadership Style – Selected Aspects

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the article is to present two issues; the concept of sustainability and the style of organisational leadership. The authors' goal is to demonstrate that a participative management style supports the implementation of the concept of organisational sustainability.

Methodology: The research method used to achieve the objective is a critical analysis of the literature, an analysis of secondary research and a review of good practice.

Findings: As the presented examples of the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in specific companies show, the implementation of this type of idea is definitely conducive to the selection of a participative style of leadership.

Value Added: Active participation of subordinates in shaping the sustainable development strategy in the organisation and their awareness of the real influence on the vision is realised, to a very large extent determines the success of achieving the goals set by the leader (and worked out together with subordinates).

Recommendations: It is recommended to create a vision, according to which the company operates in the spirit of sustainable development, and to enable subordinates to actively participate in the implementation of the strategy and the systematic evaluation of its results.

Key words: sustainable development, leadership, good practices



Introduction

The term sustainability is nowadays commonly mentioned in all sorts of contexts. Year on year, more and more is being said in public debate about the need to take a forward-looking view of the use of available resources, with careful consideration of the potential needs of future generations. This is primarily due to an increasingly consumerist lifestyle, the systematic and ever-increasing (Sadowski et al., 2008) consumption of non-renewable resources (e.g. minerals), which is a natural consequence of the growth of the world's population, the increasing affluence of societies, as well as dynamic technological development (Trojanowski, 2015).

Central to the concept of sustainable development was the World Commission on Environment and Development (the so-called 'Brundtland Commission'), which in 1987 published a report entitled "Our Common Future" (Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development..., 2019), in which it defined the title concept. According to the Brundtland Report, sustainable development is development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Zakrzewska, 2019; Burchard-Dziubińska et al., 2015; Latoszek, 2016). The concept should be considered on two levels: the concept of basic needs and the idea of limited opportunities (Business Strategy for Sustainable Development, 1992). The former includes in particular the basic needs of the world's poorest people, which, in the light of the document prepared by the Brundtland Commission, should be given the highest priority. The concept of limited opportunities, on the other hand, refers to the imposed capacities of the environment to meet the needs of present and future societies by the state of technology and social organization (Kozłowski, 1997).

The concept of sustainability is approached in quite a similar way in the disciplines of management and quality sciences. Due to the extremely broad scope of the title formulation and the need to 'fit' it to the specifics of the subject, a kind of redefinition of the concept of sustainability can be seen in the literature. Above all, sustainable development of an organisation and an enterprise is indicated, which should be understood as its stable development compliant

with the requirements of environmental protection and in which the needs of the present generation can be satisfied, while not reducing the chances of future generations to satisfy them (Dziawgo & Zawadzki, 2011). To make some simplification, in pursuing the concept of sustainability, an organisation simply meets the expectations of its stakeholders and employees in full, while keeping in mind the expectations and needs of future generations (Gorczyńska, 2013).

The literature emphasises that the concept of sustainable development should be considered in three dimensions: economic, ecological and social (Kaputa, 2013). It follows that this development means the necessity to maintain balance both from the natural and strictly economic point of view, as well as taking into account the social area. This way of defining the scope of the described concept makes the issue of sustainable development extremely broad and capacious (Szadziwska, 2010).

The aim of the article is to present two issues; the concept of sustainability and the style of organisational leadership. The authors aim to demonstrate that a participative management style supports the implementation of the concept of organisational sustainability. The research aims to link the basic theoretical concepts; sustainability, CSR and participative leadership style. The research method used to achieve the objective is a critical analysis of the literature, an analysis of secondary research and a review of good practice.

Sustainable Development and CSR Concept

When discussing the concept of sustainable development, its relationship with corporate social responsibility (CSR) cannot be overlooked. The literature indicates that until recently the two terms were used interchangeably. For some time now, however, Corporate Social Responsibility has been defined through the prism of the organisation and its responsibility towards society and the environment (Jastrzębska, 2016). Sustainable development, on the other hand, aims to ensure a stable and enduring existence for global society, with particular attention to the general needs of future generations (Jastrzębska,



2016; Kaputa, 2013; Zuzek, 2012). In contrast to CSR, the concept of sustainability has, therefore, a more global dimension. Thus, an extremely important, from a practical point of view, conclusion emerges from such definitions: when an organisation implements the concept of sustainability, the scale of its activities is an important issue. In this context, large corporations, which in their activities affect many areas on a macro scale, should definitely focus more on the implementation of the concept of sustainable development than on CSR, which, of course, does not mean that they should cease to be socially responsible enterprises in activities undertaken on a micro scale. In the remainder of this paper, the concept of “sustainable development” will be analysed from the broadest possible perspective, also covering the activities of organisations undertaken under corporate social responsibility, due to the almost complete overlap of the areas of interest of both concepts (Przychodzień, 2013; Sztumski, 2006; Bolesnikow et al., 2019).

Sustainable Development and Leadership Style

There is no doubt that the approach to the concept of sustainable development is linked to the approach on the part of leaders to their leadership or management styles. As it was mentioned, sustainable development in a company does not only include an extremely broad definition worked out by the Brundtland Commission, but above all, it has a significant impact on the ‘social’ plane of functioning of the organisation, influences the organisational culture in the company and the approach of employees to performed tasks. The *spectrum* of levels affected by the implementation of sustainable development in a company or organisation is therefore very large.

It is important to remember that the role of a leader in an organisation depends on the general acceptance of the leader by the members of the organisation or its employees. For a person to be able to be called a ‘leader’, it is extremely important that they have gained the respect of their subordinates;

that they are a trustworthy person. A leader must also be characterised by authenticity and a willingness to make, sometimes also unpopular, changes (Czarnecki, 2018). All these factors, which are a kind of *sine qua non* for the functioning of leadership, are closely related to the leader's decision to implement the concept of sustainable development in the organisation. This is because, without a doubt, the leader's demonstration of openness to pursuing a policy in line with the vision of sustainable development, and thus a long-term perspective on the needs of future generations, can definitely strengthen the leader's position in the organisation. In doing so, they make their subordinates feel more authoritative. They perceive the foresight and prudence of the person leading them. They see that the leader is not only focused on making a profit or building his or her own position, but also has the welfare of the next generation of society at heart. There is no doubt, however, that such a state of affairs requires a leader to be consistent in realising this vision and pursuing the goal of leading the organisation in the spirit of sustainability.

It is also worth considering how the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in an organisation influences the choice of leadership vision followed by the leader on a daily basis. Does the practical implementation of the concept described make it necessary for a manager to adopt an authoritative style? Or is it more conducive to democratic and participative styles? It is very difficult to unequivocally answer these questions from an abstract point of view. Indeed, it should be emphasised that the leader should make the choice of the appropriate leadership style in relation to the current conditions prevailing at any given time in a particular organisation. Important factors arising from both the internal and external environment of the organisation that influence the choice of leadership style include the area in which the organisation operates (both from a subjective and geographical point of view), the size of the organisation, the level of determination of work processes by technology, the level of autonomy and discipline of subordinates, personnel factors in the broadest sense, and – crucially – the structure and organisational culture prevailing in the organization (Jasińska, 2009).

In general, it seems that the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in an organisation is most conducive to the application of



a participative style. After all, it is difficult to imagine the successful implementation of the concept without the participation of subordinates in its creation. The leader should consult the strategy with the subordinates. Thanks to this, apart from e.g. better analysis of the decisions taken (due to the ‘brainstorming’ effect), the members of the organisation have a sense of real influence on the shaping of its policy, and thus – certainly at the practical stage of the implementation of the strategy, they will have a completely different approach to its implementation and will show much greater commitment to achieving the jointly established goal. The participation of subordinates in the creation of strategies for the implementation of activities within the framework of the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in specific social groups is undoubtedly one of the pillars of the correct implementation of this idea. So what does this state of affairs look like in the day-to-day operations of specific organisations?

Implementation of Sustainable Development in the Organisation

Implementing the concept of sustainable development in an organisation is an extremely complex topic. Nowadays, organisations and especially companies very often decide to implement the assumptions of this idea, which is due to several basic factors (Szadziewska, 2010). Firstly, activities related to the implementation of sustainable development, or those in the field of corporate social responsibility, are extremely important from the marketing point of view. The organisation shapes its image as an entity that has the welfare of future generations at heart; it shows that it is not only interested in achieving personal gains, but also, in the name of the common good, undertakes numerous actions to secure the existence of future generations. This is particularly important in the case of businesses and translates into company profits in the long term. By committing to such ideas, they increase their competitiveness and, consequently, build a more stable position in the market, which

enables them not only to retain their existing customers, but also often makes it easier to attract new ones. Secondly, the emphasis on sustainability is a kind of response to the significant increase in general societal expectations in this respect. Thirdly, both organisational and business managers often come to the conclusion on their own that it is worth taking care of the environment, if only for the sake of their own children's future. As a result, they are, to some extent, deciding from the bottom up to steer their organisation in the spirit of sustainable development. Fourthly, it should be emphasised that from the perspective of companies, operating in accordance with the idea of sustainable development very often contributes not only to a significant improvement of their image, but also brings measurable financial benefits. By implementing new technologies or running a cost-effective, environmentally friendly economy, a company can significantly reduce its costs while maximising its profits, which is, after all, the main objective of doing business. Undoubtedly, it is also a big motivator to implement the vision of sustainable development in the organisation. Fifthly, and finally, it should be remembered that certain actions, which are related to the concept of sustainable development, are enforced by generally binding laws (Berdo, 2006; Ustawa z dnia 27 kwietnia 2001 r. Prawo ochrony środowiska).

The concept of sustainable development may be implemented by a number of means, including the implementation of new technological solutions allowing e.g. the reduction of energy consumption or carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere, undertaking numerous environmentally-friendly activities (e.g. selling products that have the least negative impact on the environment or segregating waste at the organisation's headquarters), but also promoting and rewarding pro-environmental behaviour by subordinates, organising various types of competitions, and organising various types of environmental competitions (Miśkiewicz et al., 2021). These include the implementation of new technological solutions allowing e.g. to reduce energy consumption or carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere, undertaking numerous environmentally-friendly activities (e.g. selling products which have the least negative impact on the environment or segregating waste at the organisation's headquarters), but also promoting and rewarding pro-environmental behaviours undertaken



by subordinates, organising various types of competitions and social campaigns addressed to stakeholders and joining projects supporting the idea of sustainable development carried out by other entities (including participation in numerous projects by widely understood state entities). Due to the limited scope of this study, only selected methods of implementing the idea of sustainable development will be presented on examples of specific enterprises (good practices) and their relation to the type of management style preferred by the leader of a given organisation.

Good Practices in Implementing the Concept of Sustainable Development Through Examples of Companies

Unilever

Unilever is a multinational company that primarily produces food, cleaning and personal care products, and has been pursuing a sustainability strategy since 2010. In setting three goals, which include improving the health and well-being of more than one billion people, providing livelihoods for millions of people and reducing its environmental impact by at least half (Unilever, 2019), the company based its strategy on the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations (Agenda na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju 2030).

The company consistently implements the strategy it has adopted and strives to achieve the set targets. Accordingly, the company presents its progress in the implementation of the plan in annual, quite detailed reports, through which it shows indicators demonstrating the percentage effectiveness of fulfilment of the set objectives (Sustainable Living Report, 2017). First and foremost, the company has implemented new technological solutions to reduce the negative impact of its activities on the environment. As a result, the company has significantly reduced its carbon dioxide emissions into

the atmosphere, reduced its energy consumption and reduced the amount of waste generated, recycling some of it and reusing it in production processes.

The actions taken by Unilever have had a number of positive effects – both those related to the company’s image in the eyes of customers and those strictly internal related to the general functioning of the organisation and the social aspect of the employees’ approach to their duties. Since the implementation of the strategy, the group’s brands with environmentally and socially friendly objectives have grown twice as fast as the others. The company has also made dramatic reductions in the costs of its operations, with savings running into hundreds of millions of euros over the 1.5 years of its eco-efficiency programmes. In addition, Unilever has become the employer of choice in more than 50 countries (Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu, 2015).

As the company’s research shows, customers, employee candidates and employees have placed much more trust in the Group since the implementation of the sustainability concept. In the opinion of the company’s management and on the basis of stakeholder surveys, it is the idea of sustainable development that is behind the company’s dynamic growth. In fact, more than half of the customers are interested in making their purchases as sustainable as possible. A similar percentage of employees stated that they are much more willing to work in an environmentally friendly place and, thanks to the awareness of contributing to the implementation of a vision linked to the welfare of future generations, they are more conscientious about their daily duties (Unilever, 2019).

Leaders deciding on the choice of leadership style in specific areas of the organisation’s operations undoubtedly had in mind the strategy being pursued and the desire to achieve the goals set out therein. Since the start of sustainable development at Unilever, a great deal of change has taken place in virtually all areas of the company’s operations – from strictly technical issues such as new, environmentally friendly machinery to employee workwear and the installation of water purification filters in workplaces to move away from the use of plastic bottles.

In this case, there is the implementation of a participative and consultative leadership style by the leaders (Kupczyk et al., 2021) Employees were actively involved in creating a way of implementing the concept of sustainability in



the company. They have had the opportunity to propose their own solutions and, based on their own experiences of daily work in the company, suggest areas where changes can be made to make Unilever's operations as sustainable as possible. Importantly, the company's managers systematically monitor the implementation of the established strategy, while involving employees in the whole process. It is also noteworthy that subordinates are openly invited to cooperate in improving the solutions already adopted. Messages such as "we see the results and learn from them" or "we are constantly looking for new ideas and ways to improve our value chain" are straightforward. This is a good example of encouraging subordinates to participate in how to improve the implementation of sustainability (Czop & Leszczyńska, 2012). It should not be forgotten that the annual reports presented by the company and their thorough evaluation allow employees to see how and with what efficiency the implementation of the whole process is going, including the ideas in which they had a direct involvement. Such activities foster a sense of employee participation expressed through participation in decision-making, goal-setting or problem-solving processes. This form of organisational management has an impact on the motivation of employees, which results in greater commitment to their daily duties, and a leader guided by such values can certainly be described as a "positive leader" (Gordon, 2018).

Viessmann

Viessmann currently operates in dozens of countries and employs almost 10,000 people. It specialises in the production, distribution and application of heating systems. The company's sustainable development strategy is based on the improvement of processes directly linked to the product life cycle (Viessmann, 2019). It also encompasses environmental aspects, such as energy and material efficiency, emissions, as well as social issues (e.g. staff structure, labour and health protection and employee satisfaction) (Gerlach & Tomaszewska-Lipiec, 2017). The spectrum of coverage of the strategy implemented by Viessmann is therefore very broad. Accordingly, the implementation of the concept is divided into two phases. In the first, a comprehensive analysis of the current state of affairs is carried out.

It examines how the company currently operates in the areas covered by the idea of sustainable development, and there is an extensive overview of the demands and requirements of the various stakeholder groups, which include not only customers, contractors and employees, but also municipalities, authorities and associations. At the beginning of the second phase, the effects of the first phase are evaluated and the current status is summarised. Standards are then written down and adapted in the form of company-wide guidelines. In the case of key indicators, targets and deadlines are also defined in detail and communicated to those responsible in the company's business units.

It is noteworthy that a management group has been set up in the company, which is responsible for coordinating all activities, delegating tasks to individual working groups and recording and controlling their results, but also reporting to the management board and preparing decisions. The second level of the structure is, in turn, the four working groups responsible for specific areas of sustainable development implementation: strategy and management, products and processes, resources and infrastructure, and employees and the workplace environment. This system, referred to as the PDCA cycle (Obora, 2010), provides effective oversight of the pursuit of goals and confirmation of their achievement.

Viessmann implements the concept of sustainable development in many ways. In addition to classic instruments, such as the use of new production technologies or the conversion of the workplace infrastructure to one that has as little negative impact on the environment as possible, the company also uses original solutions. For example, the company has created an online forum, the Alliance for Sustainability. This portal provides a compilation of information on sustainable construction, so that one can view complete data related to the approach to natural resources in the construction industry. In addition, the platform aims to spread the power of building facilities without environmental impact in the form of carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere. With its unique 'Efficiency Plus' project, the company has managed to reduce its fossil energy consumption by as much as two-thirds and reduce harmful gas emissions by more than 80%, which has also contributed to a significant reduction in its costs.

Viessmann's membership of the Climate Protection and Energy Efficiency Group of the German economy is also extremely important in implementing the concept of sustainable development. Like every company in the Group, Viessmann is obliged to regularly report on its achievements in pursuing its sustainability policy to the public (Kaputa, 2013). In addition, the topics of climate protection and energy efficiency must be included in the company's educational offering (Grupa ds. Ochrony Klimatu i Efektywności Energetycznej, 2019), so that the company trains its employees in this area and is involved in numerous social campaigns related to this area.

Particular attention should be paid to the change in the management style of the company, which took place as the company began to implement the concept of sustainable development. Martin Viessmann, who took over the leadership from his father in the early 1990s, started the process of numerous changes in the way the company was run from the very beginning. Step by step, the leader changed the organisational culture prevailing at Viessmann (2019). He opted for active employee participation in decisions about the future of the company. He decided to move away from any characteristics of an authoritative style to the use of a participative style. His day-to-day operations were guided by a simple principle: less top-down management, more team orientation. He enabled employees to participate in meetings where they jointly discussed the principles, strategies and objectives of their daily work. This type of meeting has become particularly important since the implementation of the sustainable development strategy began. The leader decided to regularly discuss the effects of the strategy with his subordinates. By systematically reporting on the progress in implementing sustainable development, he demonstrates the numerous benefits that come from involving employees in its implementation. He makes them realise that everyone, regardless of their position in the company, contributes their 'piece' to the fulfilment of all the assumptions and, consequently, makes a real contribution to improving the well-being of future generations.

Summary

In summary, the concept of sustainable development has recently become increasingly popular. Every year, more and more organisations (especially companies) decide to prepare a specific strategy to implement the idea of sustainable development, noticing the numerous advantages of this concept, the constantly growing social expectations in this area, but also the approach of their competitors to care for the environment. Organisations that have decided to become involved in the implementation of a vision that aims to benefit future generations of society gain numerous benefits, not only in terms of image, but also financially (Przytuła & Strzelec, 2019).

As the presented examples of the implementation of the concept of sustainable development in specific companies show, the implementation of this type of idea is definitely conducive to the selection of a participative style of leadership. The active participation of subordinates in shaping the sustainable development strategy in the organisation and their awareness of the real influence on the way the vision is realised, to a very large extent determines the success of achieving the goals set by the leader (and worked out together with subordinates). It should be stressed that it is difficult to imagine achieving full success in the implementation of this strategy if, for example, the characteristics of an authoritative leadership style are applied. The top-down imposition of specific goals on subordinates in this respect and the lack of any possibility for them to influence the company's approach to the idea of sustainable development may have the opposite effect to the one intended. Employees would not be motivated to get involved in achieving the results set by the leader and, consequently, it would not be possible to fulfil the made assumptions in full (Moszoro, 2011; Wilmanowicz, 2012). Above all, it is for this reason that it is necessary to jointly create a vision, according to which the company operates in the spirit of sustainable development, and to enable subordinates to actively participate in the implementation of the strategy and the systematic evaluation of its results, thus adopting a participative style of management, where participation and participation are among the employee motivation tools (Gross-Gołacka et al., 2021).

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