Heim, I. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3023-4839, Laker, B. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0850-9744 and Tabaeifard, S. J. (2026) Responsible leadership: a systematic literature review, theoretical framework, and future research directions. Journal of Business Research, 203. 115801. ISSN 1873-7978 doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115801 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/125300/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115801

Publisher: Elsevier

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

Responsible leadership: A systematic literature review, theoretical framework, and future research directions

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review critically examines recent developments in research on responsible leadership (RL) through a framework that combines the core elements of leadership theory: motive, mode and mindset (MMM) along with their antecedents, decisions, and outcomes (ADO). It covers studies published from 2004 to 2024, drawing from interdisciplinary literature across fifty-three academic journals and 140 articles. The review defines RL as a distinct concept and highlights its influence on the individual- (micro), team- (meso), and macro-organizational and societal levels. It provides an overview of the research domain, focusing on trends in RL research, discussing its definition, and distinguishing it from other leadership theories. Additionally, it outlines key characteristics, moderators, causal mechanisms that reinforce the relationship between RL and long-term organizational outcomes. The review also proposes a framework, illustrative propositions, and potential themes and research questions for further investigation.

1. Introduction

The moral and ethical aspects of leadership have received increasing attention in recent studies, leading to the development of concepts such as authentic leadership, servant leadership, and ethical leadership. In contrast to these concepts, responsible leadership (RL) is recognized as an approach that prioritizes ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities while considering the perspectives of various stakeholders (Voegtlin, 2016). Understanding RL is essential for navigating the complexities of global social, environmental, and organizational changes, as the growing discourse frequently highlights the role and responsibilities of business leaders for these challenges (Pless & Maak, 2011). Recent examples include discussions on deforestation caused by the palm oil industry, which has significantly impacted Indigenous communities in Malaysia, residents in Louisiana's Cancer Alley holding petrochemical plants accountable for pollution in the U.S. and growing concerns about market dominance, misinformation, and privacy risks associated with the global expansion of platform companies and digital technologies.

Early literature defined RL as leadership style within a stakeholder society, integrating ethical dimensions such as norms, values, and principles (Pless, 2007). Since then, research on RL has not only distinguished it from other leadership styles but also highlighted its evolution toward integration of environmental responsibility. According to Pless (2007), as organizations face increasing scrutiny from both internal and external stakeholders concerned with ethical conduct, corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate citizenship, and sustainable business practices, the demand for leaders capable of managing these complex expectations has grown. This literature review contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on RL by clarifying its definition, theoretical foundations, future research, and the challenges associated with its implementation.

Despite multiple previous contributions from earlier studies and some existing literature reviews (e.g., Frangieh & Yaacoub, 2017; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; de Klerk & Jooste, 2023), key gaps remain in the RL literature, particularly, regarding the integration of social and environmental concerns and the need for a more comprehensive conceptual framework. These gaps necessitate a systematic review to refine

existing understanding and advance theoretical and empirical discourse. This review aims to address these issues. First, there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition and conceptualization of RL. Current literature often treats RL as an extension of other leadership theories, such as ethical, servant or transformational leadership, without clearly defining it as a distinct construct. Second, some recent scholarship has even questioned whether RL is an independent construct or merely an extension of existing theories (de Klerk & Jooste, 2023), however, while still acknowledging that the core meaning of RL is unique. This lack of clarity in existing research hampers the development of a cohesive theoretical framework for RL and complicates efforts to measure and compare RL across its different contexts. This literature review elaborates on previous works by conceptualizing RL as a multifaceted leadership approach that integrates ethical, social, environmental, and relational dimensions. Furthermore, the operationalization and measurement of RL remain inconsistent, with varying definitions and approaches that hinder the assessment of its effectiveness across different settings. Second, while past reviews have highlighted the challenges, positive outcomes and effective practices associated with RL—such as enhanced organizational performance and better stakeholder relationships—they often overlook other factors that influence the relationships between the RL and these outcomes. This oversight is significant at the individual- (micro), team- (meso), and macro-organizational levels, particularly within diverse cultural, political, and organizational contexts. Third, various research methods have been utilized to generate knowledge in the field of RL, which has led to fragmentation and inconsistent findings across different studies. As a result, several gaps persist in the current literature on RL.

This literature review aims to systematically compile and critically evaluate available research on RL through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), addressing the unresolved issues identified in existing studies. Specifically, the review focuses on the following aspects: clarifying the conceptualization of RL, examining the challenges related to its implementation, and identifying key antecedents and outcomes, along with their moderators across different organizational and cultural contexts at various analytical scales or perspectives of analysis. It also suggests directions for future research. To achieve its objectives, this review formulated the following research questions: (RQ1) How is RL defined and conceptualized in the existing literature? (RQ2) What are the key antecedents, decisions and outcomes associated with RL at the individual (micro-), team- (meso-), and macro-organizational levels? What are the moderators affecting the relationship between RL and its outcomes? (RQ3) What frameworks can be employed to describe the constructs of RL, what gaps exist in the current literature on RL, and what directions should future research pursue? To answer these research questions, we applied a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, following established guidelines to ensure rigor and transparency.

Our study makes four key contributions. First, we investigate the essential descriptive aspects and intellectual field of RL research. Unlike previous studies, we identify a distinct multi-level nature of RL, complete with unique constructs that set it apart from other leadership theories. Second, as this is a literature review, one of its goals is to advance theoretical understanding of RL. This study contributes to theory by integrating its antecedents, decisions, and outcomes (ADO) framework with the motive, mode, and mindset (MMM) (Eva et al., 2019) components of RL, thereby enhancing the clarity and cohesion of RL research. This integration enables a layered understanding of RL by aligning the dynamic flow of leadership processes (ADO) with the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of leadership execution (MMM) previously underexplored in this combination. This integration reveals how leaders' internal drivers (motive), behavioral enactment (mode), and cognitive framing (mindset) influence and interact with RL processes across levels. This mapping not only clarifies RL's conceptual architecture but also uncovers causal dynamics—such as how mindset influences decision-making or how motive shapes outcome trajectories—that have been overlooked in prior reviews. We apply the ADO

framework within this literature review to present the dynamics of RL through structured categorization while the MMM framework presents the core components of RL, derived through the synthesis of existing literature. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we develop illustrative theoretical propositions. Unlike previous reviews, we analyze the dimensions of RL and offer dual-lens integration that bridges these dimensions with the dynamic processes of RL. This approach not only clarifies RL's conceptual architecture but also generates new explanatory pathways for future empirical testing. By applying the integrated framework to RL, we offer a mechanism-based understanding that helps reconcile fragmented definitions and identify contingent factors shaping leadership outcomes across levels. Third, we offer content-based recommendations for future research. These include improving theoretical clarity, enhancing methodological rigor, exploring effective organizational practices, conducting multi-level studies, and expanding the contextual boundaries of RL research. For each proposed theme in future research, we present potential research questions to guide inquiry. This expansion could involve such as investigating RL in non-Western contexts and examining emerging technological environments, such as digital industries, remote and hybrid teams, or AI-driven workplaces. Finally, this study advances RL theory and practice by influencing leadership development, organizational culture, stakeholder engagement, ethical decision-making, sustainability, and societal impact beyond organizational boundaries. It reinforces trust and alignment with global frameworks, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) (Heim & Mergaliyeva, 2024).

We organized the remainder of this paper into the following main sections. In Section 2, we outline the methodology used to identify relevant articles, including our criteria for inclusion and exclusion, as well as our data analysis strategy. Section 3 provides a descriptive analysis of publications in the literature on RL. Section 4 introduces the conceptual models of RL, integrating the ADO framework, which explores the dynamics of RL, and the MMM model, which highlights its core dimensions. Finally, in Section 5, we propose a future research agenda based on our findings and the gaps we have identified.

2. Research strategy

This SLR follows a rigorous and structured research protocol (Gaur & Kumar, 2018; Paul et al., 2021) to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased analysis of the existing literature on RL. The objective is to provide a thorough summary of the current research landscape, identify emerging trends, and reveal existing gaps in literature. The review methodology adheres to established best practices in SLRs, with a particular focus on high-quality studies published in leading journals, as these tend make significant contributions to the field (Webster & Watson, 2002). We selected the Web of Science (WoS) database for its extensive coverage of high-impact journals across various academic disciplines (Birkle et al., 2020). The Scopus and Google Scholar databases are broader than WoS; however, this breadth includes sources that may not be relevant to our study, such as conference proceedings and books. We believe that there is a significant overlap between the two databases and WoS in terms of the publication sources used in this literature review. To ensure we included all relevant earlier conceptual papers, we conducted a search in Scopus for publications from before 2004 and found no pertinent results. Overall, we are confident that WoS provided sufficient information for our literature review. Our initial search using "Responsible Leadership" as the sole primary keyword yielded 562 articles, which represented a range of contexts and industries. The inclusion criteria and their

justification are outlined in Appendix A.

In alignment with recent literature reviews (e.g., Cohen, Fernandes & Godinho, 2025), we applied PRISMA[1] chart to report three stages in which we structured the literature selection process: identification, screening, and relevance assessment (see Fig. 1). As a result, we created a dataset of 140 papers in an Excel spreadsheet. Subsequent data analysis involved two stages: descriptive overview and theoretical thematic analysis. In the first stage of data analysis process, we applied simple descriptive systematic literature review approaches. These included analyzing publications by year, examining highly cited publications, reviewing publications by journal titles, and analyzing publications by country of researchers' affiliation and research location. We also measured the impact of RL and looked at the research methods utilized, as well as the co-occurrence of keyword in RL research, as outlined in Section 3.1 This process was crucial for establishing a solid foundation and gaining a comprehensive understanding of existing research landscape. As the next step, it was essential to interpret and define RL in leadership literature. This interpretation provides a theoretical framework for understanding how RL is conceptualized across numerous studies, as discussed in Section 3.2. During this initial stage of our literature review, we recognized the multi-level nature of RL across individual- (micro), team- (meso), and macro-organizational levels. We also identified several moderators that influence the relationships between RL and performance, as detailed in Section 3.3. We analyzed the data using theoretical thematic analysis, the methodology guided by specific analytical and theoretical interests as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved a structured, methodical, and thorough approach to coding and theme identification. The aim was to deliver a detailed, nuanced examination of aspects relevant to the research questions. Coding was conducted with a clear focus on a predefined inquiry, allowing for a more targeted interpretation of the data in alignment with the conceptual framework underpinning the study. It embraced the researchers' interpretive lens and supported a non-linear, iterative process. This method provided flexibility to revisit and refine insights throughout the analysis. Our process began with a stage where we examined the documents through two guiding lenses: (1) the antecedents, decisions, and outcomes of RL, and (2) the motives, mode, and mindset associated with RL. In the initial phase, we identified a range of themes aligned with each of these core concepts. The second phase involved exploring the interconnections among these themes and assessing their internal consistency. In the final phase, we synthesized the findings into a cohesive framework that integrated all the thematic strands. The three authors convened regularly to deliberate on matters concerning the implementation and monitoring of the review protocol. Initially, we read the abstracts of these papers to analyze themes and subsequently browsed the full texts to examine emerging themes in greater depth. During this process, we noted key themes such as 'motive', 'mode' and 'mindset', which were derived deductively from our review of the articles, as described in Section 4. Additionally, we established categories like 'antecedents', decisions' and 'outcomes' prior to analysis, as suggested in methodological literature (Paul & Benito, 2018). This approach helped ensure a structured framework for effectively interpreting our findings.

3. Overview of the research domain

3.1. Descriptive analysis of the scope of RL research

3.1.1. Analysis of publications by year

Over the last twenty years, there has been a notable increase in

publications related to RL and its associated topics, indicating that the field is maturing and attracting greater scholarly interest. In the early years, specifically 2004 and 2005, there were no publications in this area. From 2006 to 2010, the number of publications remained relatively low, averaging just one to two articles per year (see Fig. 2). This initial phase reflects the early development of RL research, with only a limited number of studies exploring its foundational concepts. However, after 2011, and especially post-2015, the volume of RL research grew substantially, signaling increased academic attention toward RL, sustainability, and related themes. This surge appears to align with a broader societal and academic shift toward ethical and sustainable business practices, likely influenced by a growing focus on global challenges such as climate change and social equity. Remarkably, 2023 stood out as the most prolific year, with twenty articles published. This peak may indicate both an accumulation of research efforts over time and a heightened awareness of RL's importance in addressing contemporary issues. Additionally, there is increasing methodological diversity within the research, transitioning from predominantly conceptual and qualitative studies to more quantitative and mixed-method approaches. The steady rise in publications on RL illustrates the maturation of this concept, as more researchers contribute to a deeper understanding of RL and its implications across various contexts. Over the past decade, a range of societal and organizational factors may have influenced the expansion of RL research. Increasing scrutiny from stakeholders regarding ethical conduct and sustainable practices has prompted organizations to adopt RL principles. This societal demand for transparency and accountability could be a significant driver behind the growth in RL publications. Moreover, global movements advocating environmental sustainability and social justice have influenced academic research, encouraging scholars to explore how leadership can effectively address these critical issues. Organizations are increasingly recognizing that integrating RL into their strategies not only enhances corporate reputation but also builds stakeholder trust. They are aware that RL is not merely a moral obligation but can also serve as a strategic advantage in a competitive marketplace. These trends have sparked both academic and practical interest in understanding and implementing RL. Future research in this field is expected to grow, particularly in emerging areas such as digital leadership, global sustainability, and ethical artificial intelligence. Addressing these challenges will be essential for the ongoing advancement of RL. The increasing number of publications on the RL underscores its growing significance in academic and professional discussions, particularly in recent years. The rise of empirical methods, including quantitative and mixed approaches, indicates a shift towards practical application. Scholars and practitioners are focusing on measuring and implementing RL principles in organizational settings.

3.1.2. Analysis of highly cited publications and publications by journal titles

Table 2 provides a comprehensive summary of key articles and their significant contributions to the field of RL research. We highlighted eight foundational works, including Yukl (2012), Maak and Pless (2006), Dyllick and Muff (2016), Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), Maak (2007), Voegtlin, Patzer and Scherer (2012), Waldman, and Galvin (2008), and Doh and Quigley (2014). These studies reflect the diverse aspects and substantial impact of research in this area. For instance, Yukl (2012) presents an extensive review of leadership behavior research over the past fifty years. He categorizes effective leadership behaviors into four *meta*-categories and fifteen specific behaviors, emphasizing the intricate and multifaceted nature of leadership. Additionally, Maak and Pless (2006) explore the concept of RL through a relational and ethical lens. They argue that RL is inherently social and ethical, emerging from interactions with a variety of stakeholders, both inside and outside the organization. Their work introduces a "roles model" of RL, outlining the distinct roles leaders must adopt to engage stakeholders effectively and navigate the complexities of modern business environments. They emphasize essential qualities for RL, such as relational intelligence,

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[1] PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) is a guidance which focused on the reporting of systematic and *meta*-analytic literature reviews (Moher et al., 2009) which has been widely used in literature review research.

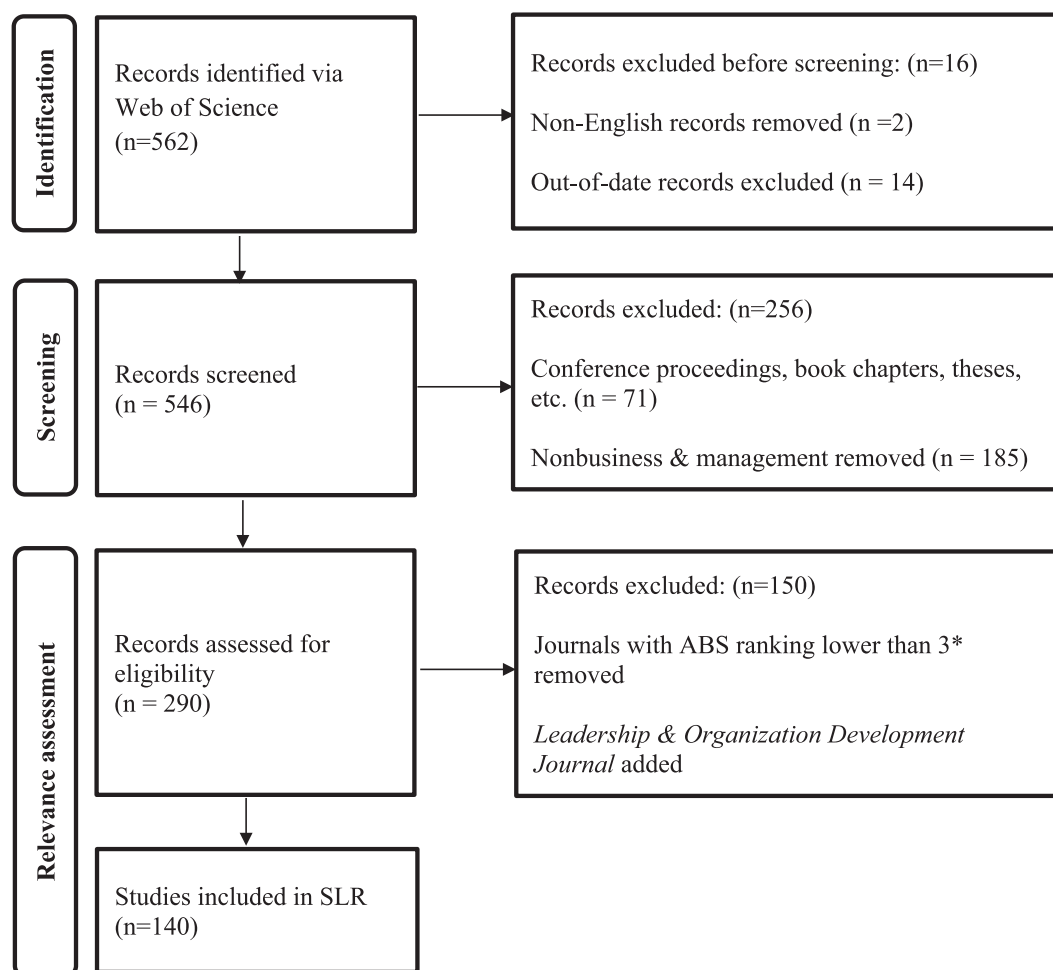**Fig. 1.** The PRISMA chart presents the steps in the data selection process. .
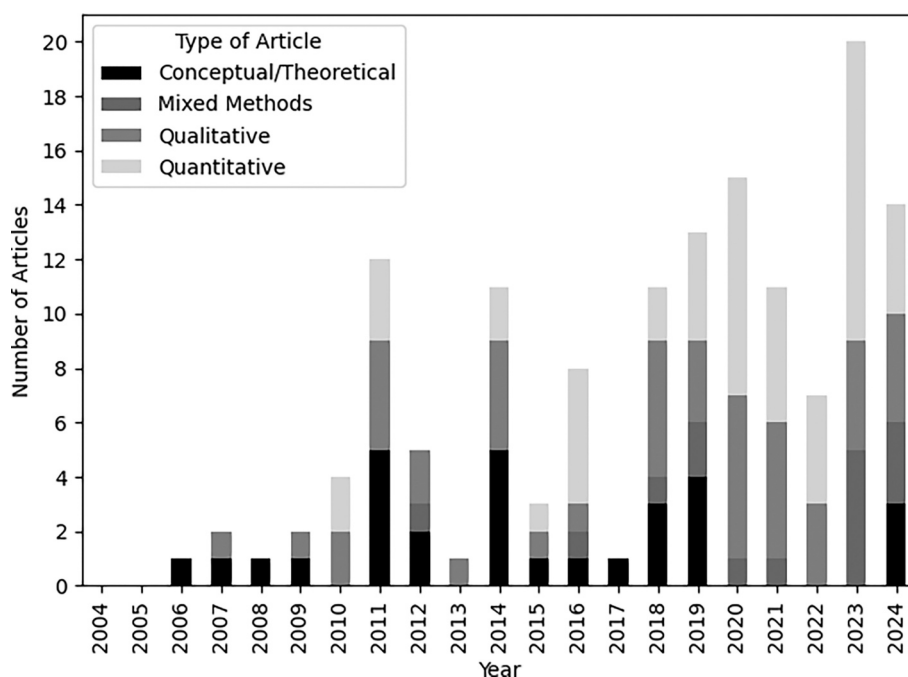Source: authors

Fig. 2. RL publications by year and type. This figure illustrates the growth and diversification of RL research over the past 20 years.

Table 1
Summary of the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
1.Database/ Keywords	Web of Science/"Responsible Leadership"	Scopus and other less commonly used databases
2.Language	Articles published in English	Articles published in languages other than English
3.Time period	Articles published between 2004 and 2024	Articles published before 2004 or after 2024
4.Journal quality	Articles from journals rated two stars or above in the ABS Journal Quality Guide	Articles from journals rated below two stars, except Leadership & Organization Development Journal
5. Type of publications	Journal articles	Review papers, editorials, conference papers, theses, books, book chapters, industry reports and notes
6.Disciplinary context	Business and Management category	Other categories outside Business and Management
7. Specific journals	*Leadership & Organization Development Journal*	

ethical conduct, and the ability to manage diverse stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) conceptualize RL as being deeply rooted in everyday dialogical practices that are relationally responsive. They emphasize that leadership involves moral accountability, recognizing the complex and diverse nature of life, and actively engaging in relational dialogue. Effective leaders adapt to their environments, foster meaningful relationships, and demonstrate practical wisdom. Research by Maak (2007) investigates how RL cultivates social capital, which supports sustainable business practices and advances the common good. Maak argues that RL is fundamentally relational and moral, extending beyond traditional leader–follower dynamics. He stresses the importance of addressing various stakeholder claims, building lasting relationships, and utilizing collective stakeholder energy to develop social capital. Next, Voegtlin et al. (2012) introduce a new model of RL that incorporates deliberative practices and conflict resolution through dialogue. They view business leaders as political actors who address global challenges through ethical and responsible decision-making. Their study highlights the positive outcomes of RL at individual, team, and organizational levels. Additionally, Waldman and Galvin (2008) offer a comprehensive overview of RL, discussing its parameters, alternative perspectives, and best practices. They emphasize the significance of accountability and transparency, suggesting that RL can lead to improved organizational outcomes.

Finally, Doh and Quigley (2014) explore how RL, grounded in stakeholder theory, affects organizational outcomes through psychological and knowledge-based pathways. They illustrate this influence with examples from three companies, demonstrating how RL enhances motivation, creativity, team performance, and organizational culture at multiple levels—individual, team, organizational, and societal.

Table 3 displays thirteen journals that have published articles on RL and related topics. Notably, two journals stand out as significant contributors in the field: the Journal of Business Ethics (JBE) with forty-four articles and Leadership & Organization Development Journal (LOD) with eleven articles. This suggests that scholars are actively investigating ethical and responsible issues within the context of business.

3.1.3. Country of affiliation/research location/industry/unit of analysis

An analysis of publications by author affiliation reveals that the United States leads with 24 % of the total publications, followed by the United Kingdom and China, each accounting for 14 %, underscoring their academic contribution to the field. Other significant contributions come from Switzerland at 11 %, while Australia and Spain, each represent 8 % of the output. Canada and Pakistan account for 6 % of the contributions each. India and France also demonstrate significant contributors, with six studies each. The research spans diverse geographical and industry contexts; however, the predominant unit of analysis remains the individual, including both leaders and followers. A significant portion of studies focuses on students enrolled in leadership courses at U.S universities and colleges (e.g., Lloyd, Carroll & Woolsey, 2024). Furthermore, case-based studies include analyses of firms in the UK's medical devices, equipment, lighting control, and clothing manufacturing sectors (Meliou, Ozbilgin & Edwards, 2021), as well as empirical studies in China's insurance industry, involving sales team supervisors and professionals across three firms (Cheng, Wei & Lin, 2019). Overall, the literature on RL remains largely theoretical, with a sustained emphasis on micro-level units of analysis.

3.1.4. Measures of RL used to assess impact

Measuring RL entails capturing its ethical, relational, and social dimensions through validated instruments. Scholars have developed a range of conceptual frameworks and psychometric scales that enable the systematic assessment of these dimensions, facilitating measurable and comparable quantification of RL across diverse organizational and cultural contexts. Among the most widely utilized instruments for evaluating RL is the Discursive Responsible Leadership Scale (DRLS) developed by Voegtlin (2011). This scale operationalizes RL through

Table 2
The list of the highly cited publications in the field of RL.

Authors	Publication title	Year	Journal	Main focus	Citation number
Yukl, G	Effective leadership behavior: What we know and what questions need more attention	2012	AMP	Review of leadership behavior research, categorizing effective leadership behaviors into *meta*-categories	626
Maak, T; Pless, NM	Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society – A relational perspective	2006	JBE	Concept of RL through a relational and ethical lens, introducing a "roles model" of RL	503
Dyllick, T; Muff, K	Clarifying the meaning of sustainable business: Introducing a typology from business-as-usual to true business sustainability	2016	O&E	Concept of business sustainability, presenting a typology from Business Sustainability 1.0 to 3.0	413
Cunliffe, AL; Eriksen, M	Relational leadership	2011	HR	Conceptualization of RL as rooted in daily, relationally responsive dialogical practices	349
Maak, T	Responsible leadership, stakeholder engagement, and the emergence of social capital	2007	JBE	How RL fosters social capital, supporting sustainable business practices and promoting the common good	317
Voegtlin, C; Patzer, M; Scherer, AG	Responsible leadership in global business: A new approach to leadership and its multi-level outcomes	2012	JBE	New model of RL integrating deliberative practices and highlights positive outcomes of RL across individual, team, and organizational levels	214
Waldman, DA; Galvin, BM	Alternative perspectives of responsible leadership	2008	OD	Overview of RL, discussing its parameters, perspectives, and best practices. RL can lead to improved organizational outcomes	178
Doh, JP; Quigley, NR	Responsible leadership and stakeholder management: influence pathways and organizational outcomes	2014	AMP	How RL, grounded in stakeholder theory, influences organizational outcomes through psychological and knowledge-based pathways	175

Table 3
The distribution of publications across the top journals.

Journal title	Number of articles for each listed journal	Authors
JBE	44	Maak (2007), Maak & Pless (2006), Maak & Pless (2009), Maak & Stoetter (2012), Berger et al. (2011), Boiral et al. (2014), Cameron (2011), Clark et al. (2014), Coldwell et al. (2012), Doh et al. (2011), Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck (2014), Freeman & Auster (2011), Fraher (2022), Fujimoto & Uddin (2022), Gond et al. (2011), Gröschl & Gabaldon (2018), Groves & LaRocca (2011), Haque et al. (2019), Hemingway & Starkey (2018), Jaén et al. (2021), Jiang et al.(2022), Karakas& Sarigollu (2013), Lips-Wiersma et al.(2020), Mària & Lozano (2010), Maritz et al. (2011), Miska et al. (2014), Miska & Mendenhall (2018), Nicholson & Kurucz (2019), Pless & Maak (2009), Pless (2007), Pless & Maak (2011), Pless et al. (2021), Rashkova et al. (2024), Robertson et al. (2017), Steyn & Sewchurran (2021), Varma (2020), Voegtlin (2011), Voegtlin et al. (2020), Voegtlin et al. (2012), Voegtlin & Pless (2014), Waldman (2011), Wang & Hackett (2016), Wisler (2018), Witt & Stahl (2016)
LOD	11	Han et al. (2019), Haque et al. (2019), Özkan et al. (2024), Javed et al. (2021), Antunes & Franco (2016), Wang et al. (2015), Ahmad et al. (2020), Javed et al. (2020), Koh et al. (2018), van Dierendonck et al. (2023), Sharma et al. (2019)
AMP	8	Yukl (2012), Doh, & Quigley (2014), Filatotchev & Nakajima (2014), Klein et al. (2024), Pearce et al. (2014), Pless et al. (2012), Stahl & De Luque (2014), Waldman & Balven (2014)
SIJ	4	Akhtar et al. (2023), Husnain et al. (2024), Junaid et al. (2024), Tahir et al. (2025)
APJM	3	Ahmed et al. (2023), Khan et al. (2024), Lasrado & Zakaria (2020)
BEQ	3	Gardiner (2011), Jennings & Velasquez (2015), Patzer et al. (2018)
IJCHM	3	Castañeda García et al. (2023), Luu (2023), Wang et al. (2024)
IJM	3	Akhtar et al. (2021), Bashir et al. (2025), Inam et al. (2021)
JKM	3	Harvey et al. (2021), Vatamanescu et al. (2020), Yasin (2021)
JL	3	Nilsson & Damiani, J (2024), Tirmizi (2023), Voegtlin (2014)
MOR	3	Huang et al. (2020), Qu et al. (2024), Zhang et al. (2023)
O & E	3	Dyllick & Muff (2016), Marín-Vinuesa et al. (2020), McDermott et al. (2019)
PR	3	Afshari et al. (2024), Lin et al. (2020), Mousa & Chaouali (2023)

three core dimensions: ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and the advancement of long-term societal impact. The DRLS employs Likert-type items to assess the extent to which leaders ground their decisions in ethical principles, demonstrate transparency, and integrate stakeholder perspectives into strategic processes. If offers a structured metric for evaluating the alignment of leadership practices with broader ethical norms.

Stakeholder engagement is a central foundation of RL, and several studies have developed instruments to assess it. Notably, Agarwal and Bhal (2020) introduced a multidimensional scale that integrates ethical and strategic leadership behaviors, underscoring the role of stakeholder engagement in fostering sustainable organizational growth. Their instrument includes items that evaluate leaders' efforts to build trust, collaborate across stakeholder groups, and incorporate feedback from

employees, customers, and external partners into strategic decision-making. Measurement tools for RL capture its relational aspect by evaluating the quality and depth of stakeholder interactions RL also encompasses sustainability and the pursuit of positive social outcomes, prompting the inclusion of items that assess a leader's commitment to ethical and environmentally responsible practices. For example, Akhtar et al. (2023) incorporated indicators to measure green innovation within the hospitality sector, highlighting the role of organizational ethical culture and strategic orientation in advancing sustainability. These instruments incorporate both behavioral and outcome-based metrics—such as contributions to CSR initiatives and long-term ecological and social impact— offering a structured means to quantify a leader's influence on organizational sustainability.

Alongside quantitative scales, qualitative approaches—such as case studies and interviews—are frequently employed to develop a more holistic understanding of RL. For instance, Gond et al. (2011) used semi-structured interviews to examine how leaders incorporate ethical considerations into their decision-making. Through coding and thematic analysis of interview data, researchers can derive qualitative indicators that capture how responsibility is enacted in practice, encompassing dimensions such as fairness, inclusivity, and transparent communication with stakeholders. Several studies adopt a multidimensional approach to assessing RL by integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. For example, Castañeda García et al. (2023) employed a mixed-methods design to identify five core practices of RL: societal orientation, ethical conduct, stakeholder engagement, power-sharing, and environmental stewardship. By combining surveys data with interview insights, such studies offer a more comprehensive perspective—capturing both numerical indicators (e.g., frequency of stakeholder engagement) and rich, contextual narratives (e.g., stakeholders' perceptions of s leader's ethical behavior).

3.1.5. Research methods used in RL research

The analysis of 140 articles on RL demonstrates a comparable preference for qualitative (36 %) and quantitative (32 %) research methods. Researchers employ qualitative approaches such as case studies (e.g., Chou and Cheng,2020).; Jaén et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2022;), interviews (e.g., Gond et al., 2011; Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014; Mousa et al., 2024), ethnography and semi-structured research conversations (e.g., Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Additionally, methods like thematic analysis (e.g., Alcaraz et al., 2016), historical analysis (e.g., Fraher, 2022), and narrative approaches (e.g., Karakas & Sarigollu, 2013; Pless & Maak, 2009; Pless, 2007) are employed to delve into the complexities and contextual nuances of leadership. These qualitative methods are particularly effective for investigating the social and environmental dimensions of leadership. They facilitate a deeper exploration of stakeholder perspectives, leadership behaviors, and the contextual factors that influence responsible decision-making. Quantitative studies, such as those by Afshari et al. (2024), Luu (2023), and Voegtlin (2011) primarily focus on empirical testing. These studies use surveys and statistical analysis to validate leadership theories or assess the impact of leadership on organizational outcomes. Conceptual and theoretical approaches, which represents 21 % of the studies (e.g., Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2011; Doh & Quigley, 2014; Freeman & Auster, 2011), play a critical role in advancing thought leadership by developing new frameworks and models in the global context of RL. Mixed methods represent only 11 % of the studies (e.g., Marques et al., 2023; Tsui, 2021; Wisler, 2018), but they indicate a growing trend toward integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of leadership. Overall, the field has employed a variety of methodological approaches, including conceptual/theoretical, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. While this diversity enriches the field, it also highlights the need for more integrative studies that can connect different methodological perspectives. Therefore, future research should aim to balance these approaches and build on these insights to advance a more comprehensive perspective on RL.

3.1.6. Co-occurrence of keywords in RL research domain

Fig. 3 illustrates the connections between keywords, emphasizing the most frequently occurring terms and their relationships. The analysis identified forty-eight keywords from a total of 856 that met the minimum occurrence threshold of five. Based on the dataset of 140 studies reviewed in this SLR, RL emerges as the central theme, with 115 occurrences. This central theme has strong connections to various forms of leadership, including Ethical Leadership (35 occurrences), Transformational Leadership (19 occurrences), Authentic Leadership (15 occurrences), and Servant Leadership (9 occurrences). Related concepts such as CSR (45 occurrences), Ethics (17 occurrences), and Values (22 occurrences) are also significantly connected. These connections highlight the multifaceted nature of RL, which incorporates ethical considerations, transformational change, authenticity, and principles of servant leadership. The strong linkage to CSR and ethics underlines the increasing focus on corporate accountability and moral conduct within leadership roles.

Sustainability (11 occurrences) and Stakeholder (22 occurrences) concepts are also prominent themes in the research. The emphasis on sustainability highlights the growing significance of long-term environmental and social impacts in leadership practices. Meanwhile, the stakeholder engagement underscores the necessity for leaders to consider and involve various stakeholders in decision-making processes, ensuring that diverse perspectives are incorporated into organizational strategies. However, while the frequency of these keywords also reveals some potential gaps. For example, the relatively low occurrences of terms like Innovation (6 occurrences) and Entrepreneurship (7 occurrences) suggest that the intersection of RL with these areas may be underexplored. This gap represents a critical opportunity for future

research, particularly given the dynamic and innovative demands of modern business environments. Additionally, the analysis indicates a significant focus on Performance (24 occurrences), Consequences (6 occurrences), and Impact (5 occurrences), demonstrating that researchers are eager to understand the tangible outcomes associated with RL. The practical implementation and measurement of outcomes in this context are complex and often depend on specific circumstances, making them a potential point for critique and further investigation. Our analysis emphasizes the theme of Antecedents (24 occurrences) and Decision-Making (7 occurrences), which are key components of the ADO framework (Paul & Menzies, 2023) used in this research to analyze findings (see section 4 below). This framework is frequently employed by scholars to frame SLRs to develop theories, enabling them to explore the "why" (antecedents in the ADO framework), the "how" (decision characteristics in the ADO framework) and the "what" (outcomes in the ADO framework) of the concepts (Paul & Benito, 2018). Our analysis indicates that the pillars of Antecedents and Decision-Making within the context of RL have been thoroughly investigated, while Outcomes have yet to be explored. Gaining a deeper understanding of the antecedents that lead to RL behaviors, alongside the decision-making processes involved, can provide more nuanced insights into RL and its outcomes. Furthermore, the role of Moderators (8 occurrences) in the relationship between RL and its outcomes is an area that warrants further exploration. Identifying and understanding the factors moderating RL can help clarify the conditions under which RL is most effective.

3.2. The interpretation and definition of RL in leadership literature

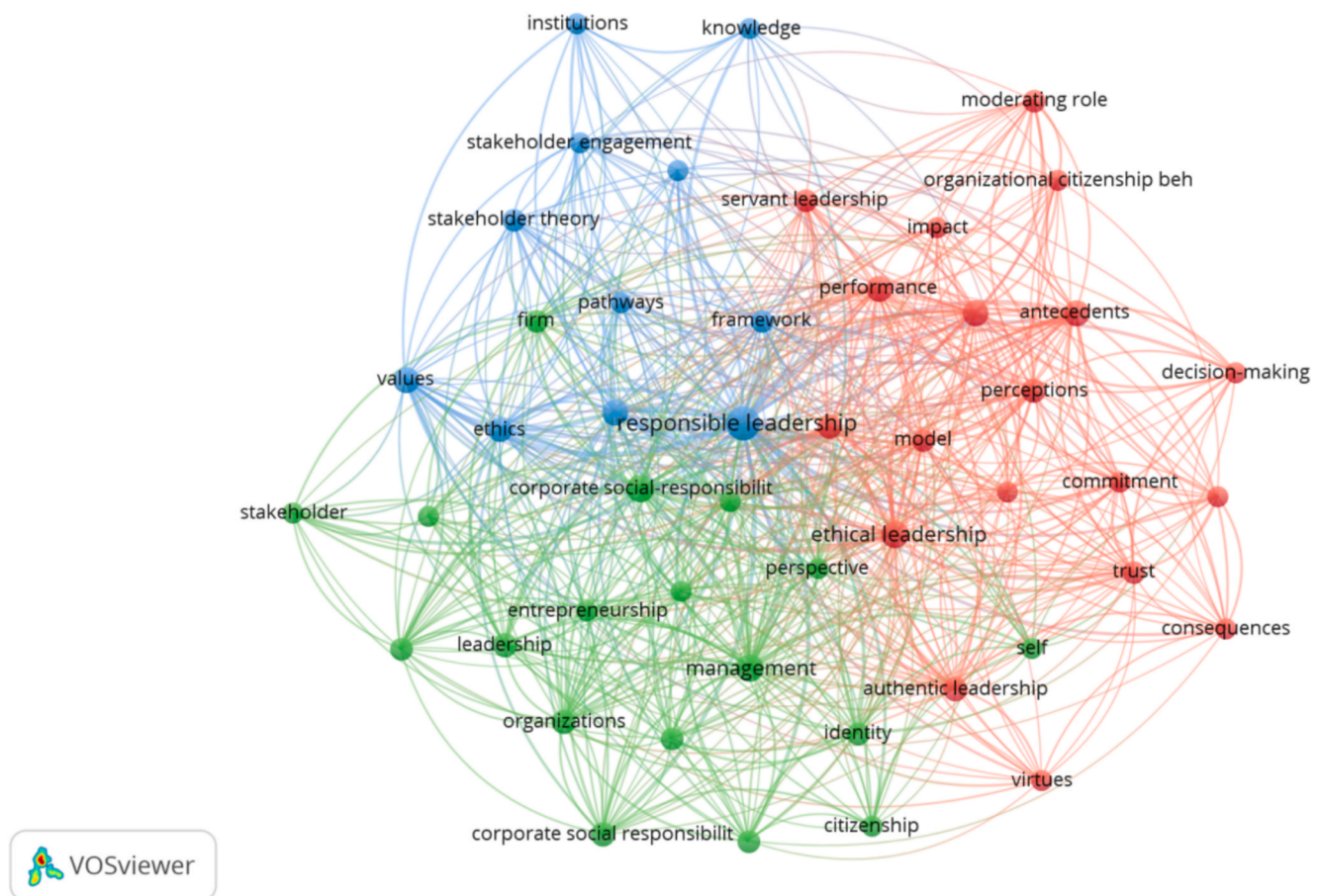In the previous section, we outlined the scope and growth of RL

Fig. 3. The network visualization of key terms in RL research. This figure shows the connections between the keywords, highlighting the most frequently occurring terms and their relationships.

studies. Now, we turn to the substantive insights regarding how the existing scholarship defines and conceptualizes RL, addressing RQ1, how RL is defined and conceptualized in the existing literature.

3.2.1. Interpretation of RL in the literature

RL is a multi-faceted approach that consists of a set of values and principles emphasizing ethical decision-making. It prioritizes ethical, social, and environmental considerations while holding accountability to various stakeholders (Voegtlin, 2016). According to Miska and Mendenhall (2018), the concept operates across multiple organizational levels: the individual (micro-level), team- (*meso*-level), and macro-organizational levels, extending beyond organizational boundaries to the macro-economic level, with cross-level interactions further broadening its scope. This perspective shifts leadership responsibilities beyond traditional roles, incorporating social and environmental responsibility alongside economic goals. Hence, RL emerges as a dynamic interplay between business and society, encompassing dimensions such as economic (profit), sociopolitical (people), ecological (planet), and moral (business impact) (Tan, 2023). Maak and Pless (2006) describe RL as a relational and ethical practice focused on building and maintaining trust with stakeholders, all guided by a shared sense of purpose. This perspective broadens the traditional understanding of stakeholders, including not only employees and shareholders but also addressing wider societal concerns. It emphasizes a leader's obligation to create a positive impact on society. Additionally, Pless, Maak and Waldman (2012) suggest that the level of responsibility leaders hold and the range of stakeholder groups they are accountable can vary based on the specific leadership project. As the global landscape becomes increasingly complex, business leaders are being urged to exemplify RL by striving to improve and contribute positively. This includes providing solutions that benefit all stakeholders, both within and outside the organization, through collaborative value creation. This need is particularly critical considering contemporary challenges such as geopolitical instability, climate change, pandemics, and social inequality, alongside the growing influence of multinational corporations (Pless et al., 2021). According to James and Priyadarshini (2021), the concept of RL has shifted from a focus on shareholder-centric perspective to one that embraces a broader relationship with all stakeholders, aiming for advancement that benefits the economy, environment, and society. Waldman and Balven (2014) argue that responsible leaders must ensure their organizations' activities benefit both current and future stakeholders. This long-term perspective on sustainability, especially regarding environmental impact, is further emphasized by Voegtlin et al. (2012). They believe that leaders should consider the lasting effects of their actions. Collectively, the recent studies underline the growing significance of RL as a field of study. However, despite growing scholarly interest, research on RL remains conceptually fragmented, with no universally accepted definition. Existing studies frame RL in various ways, as a leader's accountability to stakeholders, the fulfillment of non-financial stakeholder needs, or even a responsibility oriented toward generating profit for them. Nonetheless, there is a broad consensus that RL extends beyond a broader scope of adjacent leadership theories that primarily emphasize the leader–follower relationship, as discussed in Section 3.2.3 of this article. As the field continues to evolve, future research should focus on developing a unified definition and advancing theoretical clarity, as outlined in Section 5.1.

3.2.2. Key characteristics of RL

Based on an analysis of 140 articles, RL can be conceptualized as a multifaceted leadership approach that intertwines ethical, social, and relational dimensions. These articles highlight several key characteristics of RL, which can be summarized as follows.

Ethical Orientation: RL is consistently characterized by strong ethical orientation. Leaders within this framework are expected to act in morally sound ways, ensuring that their actions positively impact both the organization and society (Cameron, 2011; Maak & Pless, 2006). This

ethical foundation is built on principles of fairness, integrity, and a commitment to the greater good, prioritizing long-term impacts over short-term gains (Pless & Maak, 2009; Afshari et al., 2024). Within this ethical framework, RL emphasizes decision-making processes that prioritize sustainable relationships with stakeholders, further underscoring commitment to societal welfare alongside organizational objectives.

Stakeholder Engagement: A key aspect of RL is its focus on stakeholder engagement. Responsible leaders are accountable for balancing the diverse needs and desires of stakeholders, which include employees, customers, communities, and the environment. This approach aims to create value for all parties involved (Voegtlin et al., 2020; Afshari et al., 2024). The relational nature of RL highlights the importance of building trust-based relationships that extend beyond organizational boundaries. Research by Maak & Pless (2006) and Berger et al. (2011) emphasizes the responsibility of leaders to cultivate trust, mutual respect, and sustainable relationships with various stakeholders. This reinforces the interconnectedness between organizations and the wider community, ultimately creating value for all parties involved (Voegtlin et al., 2012).

Sustainability and Social Responsibility: RL goes beyond the achievements of individual and organizational; it includes a commitment to sustainability and making a positive societal impact. Responsible leaders care not only about the success of their organizations but also about the broader effects of their actions on environmental sustainability and societal well-being. Scholars such as Ahmed et al. (2023) and Maak et al. (2016) have highlighted that RL involves practices that promote environmental stewardship and tackle societal challenges, ensuring that leadership decisions benefit both present and future generations.

Relational and Social Process: RL is inherently relational, routed in the social dynamics of ethical decision-making and accountability. In this context, leadership is enacted through ongoing interaction with stakeholders. Leaders acknowledge the crucial importance of social connections in promoting ethical and inclusive practices (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). This social aspect of RL enhances leaders' capacity to tackle complex challenges using collaborative and inclusive methods, where accountability and transparency are essential components of effective leadership.

Multidimensional and Contextual Aspects: RL is a complex construct that varies according to specific cultural, environmental, and organizational contexts (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). The way RL is expressed can change based on situational factors, which means that leaders must navigate these diverse contexts with flexibility and cultural sensitivity. This adaptability highlights the intricate nature of RL's, where the social, ethical, and relational dimensions of leadership are balanced and interpreted to fit unique organizational and societal circumstances.

Multi-Level Character: RL influences various levels within an organization, with distinct effects observed at the individual (micro-), team- (meso-), and macro-organizational levels. At the micro level, RL fosters ethical behavior and decision-making among individuals. Employees who feel supported and valued by responsible leaders tend to experience higher job satisfaction and are more likely to act ethically. This dynamic helps create a culture of integrity and trust within the organization (Akhtar et al 2021; Haque, et al 2019; Lloyd, et al 2024). At the *meso*-level, RL enhances collaboration and shared values within teams (Cheng et al, 2019; Clark, Quigley & Stumpf, 2014; Luu, 2023). When leaders engage in RL practices, teams benefit from stronger dynamics and collective performance. This effect is especially significant in high-stakes environments like healthcare and finance, where trust and cohesion are essential for effective teamwork. At the macro level, RL positively impacts overall organizational performance and sustainability goals. Research by Akhtar et al. (2023), Boiral et al. (2014), and Rashkova et al. (2024) indicates that organizations led by responsible leaders are more likely to align with CSR goals. This alignment often results in a stronger reputation and higher stakeholder satisfaction compared to competitors. Such organizations show the ability to integrate ethical and sustainable practices into their operational strategies, positioning themselves as leaders in both performance and social responsibility.

3.2.3. Distinction from other leadership theories

While some recent research raises concerns about the empirical distinctiveness of contemporary moral leader behaviors, as they show moderate to high correlations with traditional styles—especially ethical and authentic leadership (Banks et al. 2018; Hoch et al., 2018). De Klerk & Jooste (2023) even questioned whether RL is an independent construct or merely an extension of existing theories. However, they still acknowledge that the core meaning of RL is unique. Thus, in Table 4 we begin by summarizing the key theoretical and empirical distinctions between RL and servant, transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership as outlined in the literature. This boundary-testing analysis demonstrates that RL is conceptually distinct across most analytical categories, despite some conceptual overlaps—such as the presence of multi-level constructs in authentic leadership theory. For example, prior research indicates that RL diverges from other value-based leadership approaches in several key respects.

Most notably, RL is characterized by its relational focus, emphasizing stakeholder engagement and accountability beyond the immediate leader–follower dynamic.. Maak and Pless (2006) were one of the first who have suggested to broaden the view on leadership as internally orientated leader–follower (or subordinate) relationship to externally orientated leader-network-of-stakeholders relationship. Second, Maak and Pless (2006) stated clear conceptual differences between RL and authentic, transformational, ethical and servant leadership theories. Waldman (2011) also suggested that RL is primarily distinguished from adjacent leadership theories by its emphasis on external stakeholder engagement, rather than a narrow focus on internal, dyadic leader––follower relationships. Maak, Pless and Voegtlin (2016, p.464) defined RL as "a relational influence process between leaders and stakeholders geared towards the establishment of accountability in matters pertaining to organizational value creation". Miska and Mendenhall (2019, p.199) presented a clear comparison of RL with other leadership-oriented approaches (transformational, servant, authentic, ethical, and shared leadership) and demonstrated that indeed several values-centered leadership approaches has common leadership interaction type—"group of followers within organization". At the same time, they proved that RL's leadership interaction is focused on "a multitude of stakeholders inside and outside the organization." Third, RL is also distinguished by its specific focus on social and environmental outcomes. Pless and Maak (2011) discusses that unlike other values-centered leadership theories, RL places particular emphasis on achieving social and environmental goals aimed at creating sustainable

value and driving positive transformation. They also point out that what sets RL apart is its inclusive approach to stakeholders—not just those within the organization, but also external parties—whereas traditional leadership models primarily concentrate on internal followers. Fourth specificity that distinguishes RL from other values-centered leadership concept is that it operates at micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis and across these levels as noted, for example, by Miska and Mendenhall (2018).

Evidence from our review suggests that the academic community regards RL as a distinct paradigm, positioned alongside but separate from adjacent leadership theories. However, most of the research confirming the distinct character of RL is theoretical and more empirical evidence could be produced to support these theoretical insights. In summary, research understands RL as a comprehensive approach that integrates ethical behavior, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to sustainability. By embedding ethical, social, and environmental considerations into leadership practices, RL demonstrates a commitment to sustainable impact, positioning organizations as stewards of collective well-being within a complex global landscape. It emphasizes relational processes, requiring leaders to be accountable to a diverse range of stakeholders and to foster trust and inclusiveness in their decision-making. In contrast to other values-centered leadership theories, RL has significant implications at multiple levels. At the micro level, it promotes ethical behavior and enhances job satisfaction. At the meso level, it strengthens collaboration and encourages shared values. At the macro level, it aligns with CSR goals, improving reputation and stakeholder satisfaction. This specific of RL is discussed in the next section.

3.3. Multi-Level perspective

In this section we discuss the distribution of RL research across units of analysis. An analysis of 140 studies on multi-level performance reveals several key insights. Most of the studies (83 out of 140) explore RL performance at the individual, team, and macro-organizational levels. This comprehensive approach indicates a strong interest in understanding how leadership affects performance across different organizational levels. Such holistic perspectives are essential for gaining an integrated understanding of leadership within various contexts. Furthermore, twenty-two studies focus on both the individual and organizational levels, suggesting a significant interest in how individual behaviors and characteristics influence organizational outcomes. Additionally, nine studies concentrate solely on the individual level,

Table 4
Boundary-testing analysis of the value-based leadership approaches.

Analytical category	Ethical Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic leadership	Responsible Leadership
Relational focus	Conduct	Follower	Values	Social, environmental and sustainable impact
Level	Individual, leader–follower relationship	Individual, leader–follower relationship	Primarily focuses on the individual (leader–follower) level, with some multi-level constructs that remain confined within organizational boundaries.	Multi-level (including organizational and societal), leader-stakeholders relationships, stakeholders can include other organizations
Outcome	Achieving, maintaining and safeguarding normatively appropriate conduct	Serving interests of followers	Trust, engagement, well-being, and sustained performance through alignment of leader's or an organization's values and actions	Sustainable values creation and social change to fulfill the organizational purpose and the needs of stakeholders
Purpose	Influencing followers (typically subordinates in an organization)	Self-sacrificial commitment in pursuit of mutually desirable goals	Acting in accordance with one's true self and values to foster positive organizational outcomes	Influencing stakeholders inside and outside of an organization
Contextual factors	Intra-organizational	Intra-organizational	Largely intra-organizational, with some attention to context such as national culture	Inter-organizational
Type of leader	Positive role model	Plays a second role, focus on a follower	Self-aware, values-driven, transparent, and psychologically grounded	Facilitator and mobilizer of stakeholder engagement
Measure	Leader's ethical attainment Employees job dedication, satisfaction and retention	Follower growth and developmentLeader's stewardship, altruism, empathy and commitment to other' growth	Leader's self-awareness, self-regulation, psychological capacitiesFollower trust, engagement, and well-being	Engagement in RL practices, including contribution to social, environmental and sustainable outcomes

Source: Authors compilation based on the publication from the data set, including Pless and Maak (2011), Freeman & Auster (2011) and De Klerk and Jooste (2023).

indicating that some researchers are particularly focused on the personal attributes and actions of leaders and their impact on performance. This emphasis suggests that understanding leaders' personal traits, behaviors, and characteristics is crucial for promoting RL. Eighteen studies examine leadership solely at the organizational level, emphasizing the importance of understanding how leadership impacts broader organizational structures and outcomes. This trend indicates that many researchers are interested in exploring how leadership practices influence organizational culture, policies, and overall effectiveness. An organizational perspective is vital for grasping the wider effects of leadership on organizational outcomes. In contrast, only two studies consider both team and organizational levels, suggesting that there is relatively less focus on the interaction between organizational structures and team dynamics. Additionally, just one study looks at both individual and team levels, pointing to a potential gap in the research regarding the dynamics between individual leaders and their teams. Furthermore, five studies did not specify their levels of analysis, which may imply that they are theoretical or conceptual papers that do not fit neatly into the other categories. Overall, while comprehensive analyses focusing on individual and organizational levels are well-represented in the literature, there is a need for more research on team dynamics and the interaction between diverse levels of analysis. Expanding research in these areas could lead to a more nuanced and complete understanding of multi-level performance analysis in leadership studies.

3.4. Moderators

This section examines the moderating factors that shape the relationship between RL and its organizational outcomes. Internal dynamics play a pivotal role, with employee goal orientation emerging as a key moderator. Individuals who are driven by specific performance goals tend to respond more favorably to RL, resulting in heightened job satisfaction and improved performance (Afshari et al., 2024). Additionally, the organizational context and culture play crucial roles in this dynamic. The specific environment in which an organization operates, including industry norms and cultural factors, affects the implementation and effectiveness of RL practices. Ahmed et al. (2023) highlighted the impact of organizational culture on efficacy of RL. Similarly, Bashir et al. (2025) emphasize that factors such as organizational culture and the availability of resources can influence how effectively leaders adopt and its subsequent outcomes.

External pressures can also influence the effectiveness of RL. Factors such as market conditions and regulatory environments play a significant role in shaping RL outcomes (Jaén et al., 2021; Boiral et al., 2014). Additionally, organizational culture and external economic factors serve as important moderators in this process (Berger et al., 2011). The socioeconomic context in which an organization operates can also affect the effectiveness of RL practices (Chou & Cheng, 2020). The context of interactions and relationships is another critical factor. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) emphasize the importance of situational factors, pointing out that the environment in which leadership occurs can moderate its effects. Similarly, Doh and Quigley (2014) note that organizational culture, external pressures, and specific leadership contexts can either enhance or diminish the impact of RL on organizational outcomes. Furthermore, institutional factors and cultural contexts also influence the relationship between governance and leadership behavior (Filatotchev & Nakajima, 2014). External economic conditions and organizational culture are also significant moderators of RL practices (Castañeda García et al., 2023). Moreover, external pressures and internal dynamics can impact the effectiveness of thought leadership (Harvey et al., 2021). These moderators underscore the complexity of RL dynamics and the various contextual factors that can either enhance or inhibit its impact.

4. Integrative analysis of findings

This section addresses RQ2 by examining the key antecedents, decisions, and outcomes associated with RL. Additionally, it explores the first part of RQ3 by examining frameworks that describe the construct of RL. It presents two models that provide valuable insights into RL, each serving a different purpose in understanding leadership behavior. Fig. 4 integrates the ADO framework which analyzes the dynamics of RL and the MMM core dimensions of RL. The ADO components of RL explain leadership as a process, whereas the MMM components outline the qualities that make leadership responsible. In summary, we suggest the MMM components as the "inner logic" of RL, while the ADO components demonstrate how this logic is applied in real-world practice.

4.1. Antecedents, Decisions, outcomes (ADO) process of RL

This section utilizes the ADO framework (Paul & Menzies, 2023) to conduct a thorough analysis of 140 studies related to RL. The analysis indicates a consistent use of the ADO framework across these studies, emphasizing important themes and theoretical contributions.

4.1.1. Antecedents

Leader Characteristics: the literature identifies a range of leader attributes—such as empathy, self-transcendence, positive affect, ability to think holistically, emotional intelligence, and ethical orientation—as foundational RL. Voegtlin et al. (2020) conceptualize responsible leaders as experts, facilitators, and citizens, requiring capacities like holistic thinking, orientation toward stakeholders, enthusiasm, activity and alert, and the ability to perceive others' needs. While these traits are widely celebrated, their conceptual overlap raises questions about definitional clarity as we discussed earlier in Section 3.2 of this article. For instance, research often treats empathy and emotional intelligence as distinct antecedents, yet both fundamentally relate to interpersonal sensitivity and affective regulation. This redundancy suggests a need for more precise operationalization in future research. Moreover, the normative framing of these traits assumes their universal desirability, yet context matters. In some context excessive empathy may hinder decision-making, while self-transcendence could conflict with short-term organizational goals. For instance, Agarwal and Bhal (2020) propose that responsible leaders demonstrate moral conduct, a focus on sustainable growth, and consideration of multiple stakeholders. These dimensions emphasize the significance of ethical behavior and the ability of leaders to build strong relationships with diverse stakeholders. While leaders who exhibit these traits are better equipped to navigate the complexities of modern organizational environments and promote a culture of responsibility, such ideals may be difficult to reconcile with competitive business imperatives.

Other studies highlight trust and person-organization fit as relational antecedents of RL, suggesting that alignment between leader and organizational values fosters ethical conduct. For instance, RL encourages whistleblowing intentions among employees by fostering trust in the leader and alignment with the organization's values (Akhtar et al., 2021). This indicates that when employees trust their leaders and feel a strong alignment with the organizational culture, they are more likely to exhibit responsible behaviors and support ethical practices. At the same time, this raises a critical tension: if organizational culture itself is flawed or ethically compromised, alignment may reinforce rather than challenge unethical norms. According to Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang (2011), self-differentiation and self-integration are individual predictors of successful leadership. This requires balancing personal growth with organizational goals, ensuring that their actions align with broader ethical and social responsibilities.

Finally, the emphasis on duty orientation (Ansong et al., 2022) and consciousness development (Boiral et al., 2014) reflects a growing interest in the moral and psychological depth of leaders. Leaders who prioritize this behavior can enhance employee commitment and
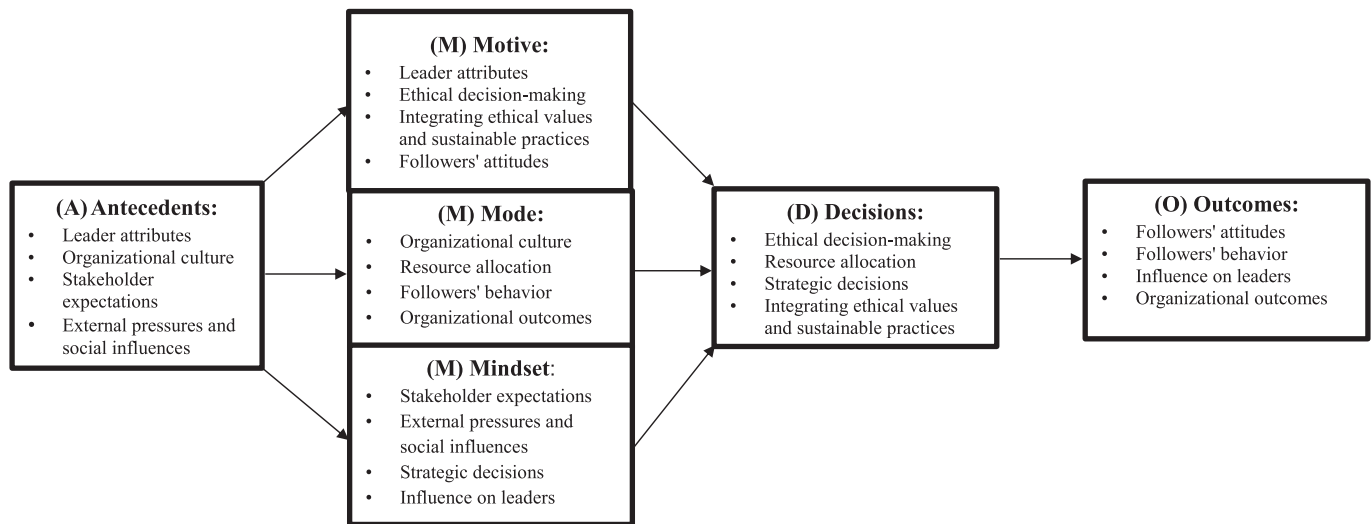
Fig. 4. The antecedents, decisions, and outcomes (ADO) and the motive, mode, and mindset (MMM) dimensions of RL. This framework illustrates how key antecedents influence the motive, mode, and mindset components of RL, shaping decisions and practices that lead to outcomes at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

performance, creating a more engaged and motivated workforce. Additionally, the stages of consciousness development in top managers significantly influence their commitment to RL. While compelling, these antecedents risk idealizing leadership as a form of personal enlightenment, potentially overlooking structural and systemic constraints.

Stahl and De Luque's (2014) framework offers a nuanced lens for understanding RL by categorizing leader behaviors into two distinct orientations: " do good" and " avoid harm". Their model emphasizes the interplay between individual-level factors—such as personal values and ethical orientation—and contextual influences like organizational culture and external pressures. This interaction suggests that RL is not merely a function of character but is deeply embedded in the leader's environment. Completing this, Cameron (2011) identifies four effective leadership strategies that cultivate conditions conducive to RL: fostering a positive climate, building strong relationships, encouraging positive communication, and creating meaningful goals. These strategies serve as practical mechanisms through which leaders can establish an environment that supports RL, reinforcing the idea that RL is both relational and systemic. For instance, a leader who fosters a positive climate and nurtures trust and positivity with their teams are more likely to inspire and embed ethical behavior into organizational life. Overall, literature offers a rich tapestry of traits associated with RL. By emphasizing these antecedents, organizations can develop leaders who are not only ethical and socially responsible but also effective in promoting sustainable performance. However, some constructs often remain abstract and difficult to measure, limiting their practical utility and a more critical approach reveals conceptual ambiguities, contextual dependencies, and measurement challenges that warrant further investigation. Overall, literature finds that leader characteristics influence all three dimensions of RL. However, motives can be idealized in some contexts, modes depend on organizational support and mindset is shaped by context.

Organizational Culture: organizational culture serves as a foundational determinant of RL, shaping both its expression and its outcomes. Central to this influence is the integration of stakeholder engagement into decision-making processes, which reflects an organization's ethical priorities and long-term orientation. A strong ethical climate—characterized by shared values, integrity, and transparency—cultivates employee trust, satisfaction, and commitment. However, the assumption that ethical climates automatically translate into improved performance warrants scrutiny. As Haque et al. (2019) and Yasin (2021) suggest, the presence of ethical norms must be reinforced by consistent leadership behavior; otherwise, a disconnect between stated values and actual

practices may erode credibility and foster cynicism. Stakeholder-centric cultures are often praised for enhancing RL through external relationship-building, thereby strengthening reputation and performance (Voegtlin et al., 2012; Javed et al., 2020). Yet, this perspective may overlook the potential tension between stakeholder demands and internal strategic priorities. Within such cultures, leaders with high relational intelligence play a pivotal role. Their ability to manage interpersonal dynamics and build mutual respect contributes to a collaborative atmosphere that boosts employee engagement and trust (Koh et al., 2018; Antunes & Franco, 2016). However, leaders must navigate competing interests, and relational intelligence—while valuable—is not often a panacea. Cultures that prioritize innovation and adaptability are said to support sustainable practices and continuous improvement. While this cultural agility can enhance organizational resilience and performance (Javed et al., 2020), it may also introduce volatility and ambiguity, particularly in organizations lacking ethical culture. Findings that organizations committed to social and environmental responsibility often outperform peers across the triple-bottom-line—economic, social, and environmental metrics (Javed et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021) might need further empirical confirmation. However, casualty between this commitment and performance can be difficult to establish, as performance may be influenced by external market conditions, regulatory environments, or industry-specific factors that confound direct attribution to culture of responsibility, ethics, and sustainability embedded within those organizations. A culture of trust and psychological safety is also vital, as it enhances employee well-being, reduces turnover intentions, and fosters a supportive work environment (Ahmad et al., 2020; Bashir et al., 2025). However, fostering such conditions requires more than policy declarations—it demands sustained behavioral modeling from leadership and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. Similarly, investment in leadership development is found to cultivate more effective leaders. These leaders are found to drive positive organizational change and foster a culture that prioritizes ongoing learning and development (Afshari et al., 2024; Haque et al., 2019), but its impact varies widely depending on program design, organizational buy-in, and the broader cultural receptivity to change. Taking together, research suggests that these cultural elements shapes RL by influencing it's all three dimensions, leaders' motives (ethical intent), modes (inclusive decision-making), and mindsets (long-term orientation), leading to enhanced organizational performance, employee satisfaction, and sustainable business practices. However, their influence is neither automatic nor uniform. A critical lens reveals

that while culture can enable RL, it can also constrain it—particularly when ethical aspirations are not matched by structural support or when competing priorities dilute focus. Thus, cultivating RL requires not only cultural alignment but also ongoing reflection, accountability, and adaptability.

Stakeholder Expectations: literature finds that stakeholder expectations have been found as an antecedent of RL, yet the extent to which they capture underlying dimensions of RL remains largely unexplored. Agarwal and Bhal (2020) demonstrates that stakeholder pressure can drive leaders toward responsible practices, suggesting a strong motivation component. However, their operationalization of stakeholder engagement primarily reflects external accountability rather than intrinsic ethical commitment, raising questions about whether the motive dimension—particularly moral intent—is adequately captured. This engagement not only builds trust and transparency but also aligns organizational goals with societal expectations, thereby enhancing overall corporate reputation and performance. Voegtlin et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of prioritizing stakeholder interests, which aligns with mode of RL—namely, the behavioral enactment of ethical and sustainable practices. Yet stakeholder expectations tend to be conflated with general corporate social responsibility, potentially obscuring the distinct leadership behaviors that define RL. This limits the precision with which the mode is assessed. Javed et al. (2020) link stakeholder engagement mechanisms tend to improve triple-bottom-line outcomes, implying a strategic orientation toward long-term value creation. While this reflects a responsible mindset that stakeholder expectations significantly influence RL behaviors, prompting leaders to consider the broader impacts of their decisions on society and the environment. While this reflects a responsible mindset, the focus is taken on organizational systems rather than individual leader cognition or values. As such, the mindset dimension of RL—especially the leader's ethical worldview and future-oriented thinking—may warrant further examination. Viewed holistically, stakeholder expectations are a relevant driving force behind RL. By actively engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes, leaders can enhance their commitment to ethical practices, strengthen relationships, and achieve sustainable organizational success. Overall, studies affirm the relevance of stakeholder expectations in shaping RL. However, they tend to emphasize observable practices, often overlooking deeper layers. Future research should investigate the multifaceted effects of stakeholders' expectations across the three dimensions of RL to reinforce its theoretical foundation and enhance its practical utility.

External Pressures and Social Influences: regulatory frameworks, societal norms, and industry standards exert external pressures that shape leaders' behavior, often compelling them to act responsibly. For instance, Ahmed et al. (2023) demonstrate that organizations in highly regulated sectors such as healthcare and pharmaceuticals face intense scrutiny, which incentivizes ethical conduct, which is essential for maintaining public trust and compliance with legal standards. While such compliance-driven behavior reflects a mode of RL, it may not fully capture the motive behind ethical action, nor the mindset that internalizes responsibility as a core leadership value. Similarly, social influences—such as peer behavior, professional networks, and community expectations—play a pivotal role in shaping RL. Miska and Mendenhall (2018) argue that perceived strong social expectations increase the likelihood of leaders adopting responsible practices. This social pressure reinforces ethical norms, but again, research often focuses on mode without adequately assessing whether leaders are intrinsically motivated or cognitively committed to RL principles. The proactive ethical conduct observed in leaders under strict regulatory and social pressure may reflect strategic compliance rather than genuine commitment. Therefore, while regulatory pressures and social influences are critical antecedents, their impact on RL must be assessed through approaches that differentiate between surface-level conformity and deeper psychological engagement. Future research should incorporate items that evaluate not just what leaders do, but why they do it and how they

conceptualize their role—ensuring that the motive, mode, and mindset dimensions are meaningfully captured.

4.1.2. Decisions

The ADO framework positions Decisions at its core, as decision-making serves as the catalyst that connects influencing factors (antecedents) to consequences (outcomes). While broader terms like behaviors or practices might encompass a wide range of actions, focusing on Decisions highlights the conscious and strategic choices that leaders make in executing RL. The decisions made by leaders are integral to the RL framework, as they directly influence outcomes. This section explores the key themes identified in the literature concerning decision-making in RL.

Ethical Decision-Making: the 'motive' dimension of RL plays a crucial role in ethical decision-making by emphasizing a leader's drive to serve society and uphold ethical standards. Maak and Pless (2006) argue that engaging in ethical practices is fundamental to building organizational trust. Their research shows that when leaders implement ethical decision-making processes, they align organizational goals with stakeholder expectations, thereby fostering a culture of accountability. This alignment not only builds trust but also ensures that the organization operates with integrity and responsibility.

Resource Allocation: research highlights the crucial role of resource allocation in supporting RL. Leaders who actively direct resources toward sustainability initiatives and ethical practices foster an environment that encourages responsible behavior among their followers. For example, Afshari et al. (2024) indicates that responsible leaders enhance workers' performance and knowledge-sharing behavior by building trust and providing leadership support. This effect is especially significant among highly goal-oriented employees. This proactive approach in resource management reflects a commitment to ethical standards and sustainability, helping to establish a culture that promotes and supports responsible practices. Furthermore, Bashir et al. (2025) emphasizes that organizational culture and resource availability substantially impact the effectiveness of RL. Leaders who prioritize resource allocation for ethical and sustainable practices not only improve organizational outcomes but also boost employees' psychological safety and engagement. Aligning resources with ethical standards and sustainability objectives is vital for building long-term relationships with stakeholders and maintaining ethical integrity within the organization.

Strategic Decisions: RL emphasizes transparency, ethical considerations, and the inclusion of stakeholder perspectives. This approach is reflected in strategic decisions made by leaders. Jiang et al. (2022) highlights that such decisions—like adopting practices that foster social responsibility—are essential for promoting ethical standards within organizations. By prioritizing social responsibility, these strategic decisions help integrate ethical values into the organization's core operations. Moreover, Karakas and Sarigollu (2013) point out that policies supporting employee well-being demonstrate a leader's commitment to RL. When leaders focus on the well-being of their employees, they not only improve organizational performance but also cultivate a supportive and ethical workplace culture. In conclusion, the decisions made by leaders play a pivotal role within the RL framework. By making ethical choices, strategically allocating resources, and implementing policies that promote social responsibility and employee well-being, leaders play a crucial role in fostering a culture of accountability, trust, and ethical behavior within organizations.

Integrating Ethical Values and Sustainable Practices: integrating ethical values into institutional frameworks leads to decisions that promote economic, social, and environmental prosperity. Jennings and Velasquez (2015) argue that incorporating ethical values into democratic, free-market, and civil society institutions fosters an environment conductive to sustainable economic growth. These decisions involve policies and practices that are consistent with ethical principles, establishing a foundation for long-term economic stability and prosperity. Klein et al. (2024) points out that policymakers should thoughtfully

design regulations to ensure that benefits are widely shared across the economy. Knight and Paterson (2018) highlight the significance of adopting sustainable practices and fostering a shared vision for sustainability. Their research emphasizes the need for prioritizing resources toward sustainable initiatives, which not only enhances environmental performance but also strengthens the overall resilience and adaptability of organizations.

Maak et al. (2016) examines how CEOs adopting either an instrumental or integrative RL style influence responsible strategies. CEOs with an instrumental style prioritize shareholder value, while those with an integrative style focus on broader stakeholder interests. Both approaches involve investing in initiatives that align with the chosen leadership style, thereby shaping the organization's ethical and social impact. Patzer et al. (2018) discusses how engaging in communicative action can help reconcile business objectives with societal goals. This approach entails investing in initiatives that promote stakeholder engagement and societal integration, ensuring that business practices align with the greater social good. Pearce et al. (2014) emphasizes the need to promote collaborative decision-making and nurturing a culture of responsibility. They highlight the importance of investing in initiatives that encourage ethical behavior and stakeholder engagement, which can lead to more inclusive and transparent organizational practices. Pless et al. (2012) focuses on engaging in social initiatives, fostering stakeholder relationships, and promoting ethical decision-making. Their research underscores the value of investing in programs that align with societal values and contribute to the common good, thus enhancing the organization's reputation and building stakeholder trust.

Solinger, Jansen and Cornelissen (2020) emphasize the importance of taking a moral stance on various issues, mobilizing others, and initiating change. Leaders who invest in initiatives that promote ethical behavior, and moral development can create significant positive changes within their organizations and the broader community. Stahl and De Luque (2014) discuss the necessity of engaging in ethical decision-making and involving stakeholders. They highlight the value of initiatives that align with ethical standards and stakeholder interests, which can lead to more sustainable and responsible business practices. Finally, Waldman and Balven (2014) stress the importance of incorporating ethical considerations into decision-making procedures. They underline the need for investing in initiatives that encourage ethical behavior and stakeholder engagement, ensuring that organizational decisions are consistent with ethical principles and stakeholder expectations.

4.1.3. Outcomes

The outcomes associated with RL are evident in various areas that impact individuals, teams, and organizations.

Followers' Attitudes: RL creates an environment of trust and engagement among followers. According to Afshari et al. (2024), RL improves the performance of knowledge workers and promotes knowledge-sharing behavior by fostering trust and leadership support. Similarly, Akhtar et al. (2023) highlights that RL practices lead to increased trust in leaders, higher job satisfaction, and greater organizational commitment among followers. This enhances trust in leaders is a common outcome noted by both Afshari et al. (2024) and Akhtar et al. (2023), as it plays a crucial role in improving job satisfaction and commitment. Positive attitudes emerge when there is alignment between leader and follower values. Groves & LaRocca (2011) found that this alignment fosters more positive attitudes toward RL. Additionally, prioritizing stakeholder interests and ethical considerations enhances followers' sense of belonging and engagement, as affirmed by studies conducted by Doh & Quigley (2014) and Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck (2014). Research shows that RL practices significantly enhance followers' commitment to organizational goals. Ahmed et al. (2023) finds that RL positively influences followers by fostering an environment of trust and engagement, thereby improving their attitudes toward these goals. Numerous studies indicate that RL led to increased trust in leaders, higher job satisfaction, and

greater organizational commitment (Afshari et al., 2024; Akhtar et al., 2023). The alignment of values between leader and follower can positively influence these outcomes. However, the extent of these effects can vary based on cultural and contextual factors. For example, in cultures with high power distance, the impact of RL on trust and engagement may be less pronounced compared to cultures with low power distance, where participative and inclusive leadership styles are more appreciated (Groves & LaRocca, 2011).

RL promotes positive attitudes among followers toward their roles and the organization. Research by Berger et al. (2011) and Chou and Cheng (2020) indicate that RL helps followers align their personal values with those of the organization, a sense of belonging. Additionally, public perceptions play a significant role in shaping followers' attitudes toward their leaders and the organization. According to Coldwell et al. (2012), these perceptions can greatly influence how followers feel. Followers often shape their attitudes based on relational experiences with leaders. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) discover that these experiences influence the level of commitment and engagement among followers. Additionally, RL fosters a culture of ethical awareness and fairness. Research by Gardiner (2018) and Gond et al. (2011) highlights that RL improves followers' perceptions of fairness and moral standards within the organization. Moreover, cultivating positive attitudes toward sustainability is intricately linked to the engagement of top management. According to Gopalakrishnan-Rennani et al. (2022) and Gröschl and Gabaldon (2018), employees are more likely to adopt favorable attitudes toward sustainability efforts when they perceive their top management as genuinely committed.

Followers' Behavior: RL, which incorporates stakeholder engagement into decision-making processes, has a positive impact on followers' behaviors. Akhtar et al. (2023) finds that individuals following responsible leaders are more likely to engage in knowledge sharing and exhibit initiative-taking behaviors, such as making ethical decisions and whistleblowing. Additionally, Agarwal and Bhal (2020) suggest that RL encourages behaviors that align with corporate social responsibility, motivating followers to participate in sustainability initiatives. Research consistently demonstrates that RL fosters ethical behavior, enhances productivity, and promotes constructive engagement among team members. Agarwal and Bhal (2020) also found that followers who perceived their leaders as responsible are more likely to engage in practices associated with corporate social responsibility, including sustainable initiatives and ethical business conduct. Furthermore, RL encourages employes to adopt behaviors that support green innovation, thereby promoting a culture of environmental responsibility (Akhtar et al., 2023). Furthermore, RL significantly enhances employees' willingness to engage in whistleblowing, thereby fostering transparency and accountability within organizations (Akhtar et al., 2021). Employees are more likely to exhibit behaviors align with their responsibilities and the expectations of organizations (Ansong et al., 2022). To expand on this, RL has a positive effect on followers' behaviors by encouraging ethical decision-making, promoting knowledge sharing, and fostering proactive engagement. These behaviors are crucial for developing a culture of responsibility and sustainability within organizations. However, organization's culture and external pressures can influence the effectiveness of RL in promoting such behaviors. For instance, in organizations that maintain a strong ethical climate, the positive impact of RL on ethical behavior is likely to be more significant. Conversely, in highly competitive environments that prioritize short-term gains, RL's influence on ethical behavior may be diminished (Akhtar et al., 2023; Agarwal & Bhal, 2020).

RL encourages employees to adopt proactive behaviors, prompting them to engage more fully in their work environments (Bashir et al., 2025). It fosters both proactive and ethical conduct among employees (Berger et al., 2011; Chambers et al., 2010) while reducing the likelihood of unethical behaviors by promoting ethical decision-making (Cheng et al., 2019). Additionally, RL promotes pro-social behaviors among followers, which contributes to overall organizational

performance (Clark et al., 2014). During crises, RL positively influences the behaviors of followers (Coldwell et al., 2012). Followers' perceptions of their leaders often shape their own behavior. While idealized views of leaders can cultivate loyalty and commitment, they may also lead to passivity, causing followers to rely on leaders for initiative rather than engaging in proactive behaviors themselves (Collinson et al., 2018). The dynamics of these relationships can Impact followers' behaviors, promoting collaborative and ethical practices (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). RL can inspire proactive behaviors among followers as they align their actions with the ethical standards set by their leaders, thereby enhancing overall organizational effectiveness (Doh & Quigley, 2014). It also encourages greater engagement and commitment among followers (Doh et al., 2011).

When leaders demonstrate a commitment to sustainability, it can lead to increased employee engagement and pro-environmental behaviors among their followers (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). For example, engaging with diverse perspectives encourages students to adopt proactive and responsible behaviors in their future careers (Gröschl & Gabaldon, 2018). Employees are less likely to engage in unethical pro-organizational behavior when they perceive their leaders as responsible (Inam et al., 2021).

Influence on Leaders: RL significantly contributes to the development of leaders themselves. Engaging in RL practices helps leaders cultivate their ethical stances and enhance their effectiveness. Doh and Quigley (2014) note that leaders who prioritize responsibility cultivate better influence within the organization. Similarly, Audretsch and Tamvada (2022) emphasize that responsible leaders are viewed as role models capable of driving societal progress, highlighting the collaborative nature of leadership. Leaders are seen not just as heroes, but as individuals operating within a complex system. Collinson et al. (2018) stresses the importance of recognizing the collaborative aspect of leadership and the collective responsibility among team members. Leaders act as facilitators of dialogue and engagement, shaping organizational culture through their interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Responsible leaders are characterized by their ability to balance the interests of stakeholders while maintaining ethical integrity. Doh and Quigley (2014) highlight that these leaders focus on building long-term relationships with stakeholders instead of concentrating solely on short-term outcomes. Responsible leaders prioritize ethical standards and stakeholder relationships, as noted by Doh et al. (2011). They play a crucial role in integrating social responsibility into corporate governance (Filatotchev & Nakajima, 2014). These leaders are regarded as ethically grounded individuals who make challenging decisions for the greater good (Fraher, 2022). Research has shown that responsible leaders develop a strong ethical foundation, which significantly contributes to their effectiveness and the overall success of their organizations. According to Afshari et al. (2024), responsible leaders often become role models for their followers, fostering a culture of responsibility and ethical conduct within their organizations. Engaging in RL practices helps leaders enhance their ethical perspectives and effectiveness. Ultimately, responsible leaders can positively influence both societal progress and organizational culture (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Audretsch & Tamvada, 2022). A leader's ethical stance is often shaped by the broader societal and organizational context. In environments that prioritize responsibility and sustainability, leaders are more likely to embrace and internalize RL principles. Additionally, supportive organizational structures and policies can encourage the development of RL behaviors.

Organizational Outcomes: RL plays a significant role in shaping various organizational outcomes, ultimately enhancing both performance and employee behavior. The underlying motives of RL are crucial in influencing these results. For instance, Afshari et al. (2024) finds that RL in healthcare settings improves the performance of knowledge workers and encourages knowledge-sharing behavior through the establishment of trust and leadership support. This effect is particularly pronounced among highly goal-oriented employees. Similarly, Ahmed

et al. (2023) demonstrates that RL positively impacts employees' voluntary green behavior—actions that exceed organizational expectation—in industries such as pharmaceuticals and textiles. This relationship is mediated by factors like leader identification and employees' intrinsic motivation to support environmental initiatives. These examples highlight how leaders motivated to serve society and uphold ethical standards can drive positive organizational outcomes.

The approach to RL, including the methods and practices employed by leaders, plays a significant role in organizational dynamics. In the banking sector, Akhtar et al. (2021) emphasizes that RL encourages whistleblowing intentions among employees. This relationship is mediated by trust in the leader and the alignment between the individual and the organization, highlighting the importance of ethical leadership in fostering transparency and accountability. Additionally, Ansong et al. (2022) indicates that RL positively affects job satisfaction and duty orientation in Ghana's manufacturing sector. Their findings that job satisfaction serves as a mediator that connects RL to increased employee commitment and ethical behavior. These insights illustrate how RL is enacted through stakeholder engagement and ethical practices. The mindset of responsible leaders, which encompasses their values and ethical perspectives, is crucial for creating a supportive work environment. Bashir et al. (2025) finds that RL promotes employee-oriented human resource management, enhancing employees' psychological safety, reducing turnover, and increases engagement and productivity. Moreover, research by Cheng et al. (2019) and Inam et al. (2021) report that RL at various levels decreases unethical pro-organizational behavior in the insurance sector. The trickle-down effect of RL is moderated by the alignment of leader–follower values, emphasizing the significance of shared values in ethical leadership. Finally, Haque et al. (2019) discovers that RL significantly influences employees' organizational commitment and reduces their intentions to leave the organization. This relationship is partially mediated by employees' affective commitment, highlighting the role of RL in nurturing loyalty and minimizing turnover. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that RL not only enhances organizational performance but also fosters a positive and ethical work environment, leading to improved employee behavior and better overall outcomes for the organization.

Fig. 4 presents a conceptual framework that outlines the key components of RL through the lens of antecedents, decisions, and outcomes. The antecedents section identifies the foundational elements that influence RL, which include leader attributes, organizational culture, stakeholder expectations, and external pressures along with social influences. These antecedents shape the context in which responsible leaders operate, and which influence leaders' decisions and practices. The decisions section emphasizes the critical choices made by leaders, such as ethical decision-making, resource allocation, and strategic choices made by leaders on behalf of organizations to achieve their core objectives. It also highlights the importance of integrating ethical values and sustainable practices, which extend beyond traditional strategic decision-making. These decisions reflect a leader's commitment to ethical standards and stakeholder engagement, leading to various outcomes. Outcomes of RL can be observed at multiple levels, including the impact on followers' attitudes and behavior, leader development, and organizational performance. Fig. 4 illustrates that contextual antecedents shape RL behaviors and decisions, which in turn produce diverse outcomes at multiple levels. This framework depicts RL as a process where specific leader characteristics and environmental factors give rise to RL actions, ultimately affecting followers, the leaders themselves, and organizational performance. The framework offers a structured lens to address the definitional fragmentation in the literature. The figure provides a comprehensive schema that captures both the behavioral mechanisms and contextual influences shaping RL. This dual-framework approach enables scholars to distinguish RL from adjacent leadership theories by clarifying its unique antecedents, decision-making processes, and outcomes at individual, team, organizational, and societal levels. Moreover, it helps reconcile competing definitions by situating them

within specific levels and stages of leadership practice, thereby offering a more coherent and integrative understanding of RL. As such, the figure serves as a conceptual bridge between fragmented interpretations and a unified theoretical foundation for future research.

Table 5 presents a cross-tabulation that maps the MMM dimensions of RL onto the ADO components, supported by empirical illustrations. This integrated framework demonstrates the novelty and substantive contribution of our study by linking leadership motives, modes, and mindsets with their antecedents, decision-making processes, and outcomes across multiple levels of analysis.

4.1.4. Causal mechanisms that shape responsible leadership decision-making

Causal mechanisms in LR studies explain the links between influencing factors such as leader characteristics, organizational culture, stakeholder expectations and external pressures and social influences) to decision and outcomes. This research identified four key types of causal mechanisms.

Psychological mechanisms (moral identity activation and cognitive framing): at the micro (individual) level, psychological mechanisms refer to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes—such as moral identity activation and cognitive framing—that shape how leaders

Table 5
Cross-tabulation that maps the MMM dimensions of RL onto the ADO components, supported by empirical illustrations.

ADO component	MMM dimension	Empirical illustration
Antecedents:		
Leader attributes	Motive	Exhibiting stakeholders sensitivity (Voegtlin et al., 2020)
Organizational culture	Mode	Cultures that prioritize innovation, adaptability and cultural agility (Javed et al., 2020)
Stakeholder expectations	Mindset	Stakeholder pressure can drive leaders toward responsible practices (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020)
External pressures and social influences	Mindset	Organizations, especially in highly regulated sectors such as healthcare and pharmaceuticals face the pressure to introduce green practices (Ahmed et al., 2023)
Decisions:		
Ethical decision-making	Motive	Emphasis on a leader's drive to serve society and uphold ethical standards (Maak& Pless, 2006)
Resource allocation	Mode	Leverage employee-oriented human resource management for psychologically safe workplace (Bashir et al., 2025)
Strategic decisions	Mindset	Strategic tools (e.g., local food) may help leaders develop positive relations within stakeholder networks (Jiang et al., 2022)
Integrating ethical values and sustainable practices	Motive	Incorporating ethical values fosters an environment conductive to sustainable economic growth (Jennings & Velasquez, 2015)
Outcomes:		
Followers' attitudes	Motive	Alignment between leader and follower values fosters more positive attitudes toward RL (Groves & LaRocca, 2011)
Followers' behavior	Mode	Individuals following responsible leaders are more likely to engage in RL behavior Akhtar et al. (2023)
Influence on leaders	Mindset	Responsible leaders cultivate better influence within the organization Doh & Quigley (2014)
Organizational outcomes	Mode	RL can lead to improved organizational outcomes (Waldman & Galvin, 2008)

Source: Authors.

interpret ethical dilemmas, make decisions, and engage stakeholders. These mechanisms typically originate within the individual (e.g., moral identity, cognitive dissonance, personal values) and influence leaders' capacity to prioritize stakeholder needs, enact responsible conduct, and foster trust through ethically grounded leadership behavior. At this level, psychological mechanisms shape how leaders interpret ethical dilemmas and make decisions. Leaders with high emotional intelligence and ethical orientation activate moral identity, which guides decision-making toward sustainability and stakeholder-centered outcomes (Boiral et al., 2014). These evolving perceptions and drivers, in turn, play a formative role in shaping decision-making processes over time. These internal dispositions also influence cognitive framing, enabling leaders to prioritize long-term ethical considerations over short-term gains. Cognitive framing refers to the mental structures and interpretive lenses leaders use to make sense of complex situations. Cognitive framing is discussed as a tool that leaders use to shape how ethical dilemmas are perceived and processed. Clark at al. (2012) demonstrated that when leaders frame decisions around stakeholder impact, teams are more likely to consider ethical consequences. Voegtlin, Walthert and Robertson (2019) argues that moral decision-making is influenced by brain regions associated with empathy, self-regulation, and identity salience. Pless et al. (2021) introduce the concept of moral imagination, where leaders cognitively reframe ethical dilemmas by envisioning alternative courses of action beyond the constraints of existing norms or routines. Moral imagination is about what could be done — imagining responses that honor diverse stakeholder needs and moral principles. These mechanisms are supported by theoretical frameworks such as Moral Identity Theory (Blasi, 1980), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971), and Cognitive Framing Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), which collectively explain how leader's sense of themselves as a moral person becomes psychologically salient and the way they structure and present situations shape RL behavior.

Relational mechanisms (psychological safety and leader-member exchange): at the meso (interpersonal/team) level, we focus on two relational mechanisms: psychological safety and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX). These mechanisms refer to the trust-based and interactional processes that shape leadership behaviors and influence ethical decision-making through relationships between leaders, followers, and stakeholders. A key enabling condition for responsible conduct is psychological safety, which emerges from trust and perceived alignment between individual and organizational values. When employees feel safe to express concerns, report misconduct, and engage in ethical dialogue without fear of retaliation, RL is more likely to be enacted. This mechanism was identified across several studies in our dataset (e.g., Bashir et al., 2025; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Özkan, Huertas-Valdivia & Üzüm, 2023). For instance, Akhtar et al. (2021) demonstrates how psychological safety fosters ethical voice and whistleblowing, reinforcing accountability and stakeholder responsiveness. Similarly, LMX theory explains how differentiated, high-quality relationships between leaders and followers support ethical behavior and stakeholder engagement. Voegtlin et al. (2012) and several other studies in our sample (e.g., Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Inam et al., 2021; Maak & Pless, 2006) highlight how relational intelligence enables leaders to build trust-based interactions, integrate ethical values into strategic decisions, and foster inclusive stakeholder dialogue. These mechanisms were coded during our thematic analysis of our dataset of 140 articles, using indicators such as trust-building, ethical voice, and stakeholder responsiveness. Additionally, Clark et al. (2014) propose that an organization's image and identity shape how its members perceive and respond to issues, influencing both their interpretations and motivations for action—further reinforcing the relational context of ethical decision-making. Theoretical frameworks supporting these mechanisms include Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Kahn, 1990) and LMX Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), both of which emphasize the relational foundations of responsible leadership. While LMX theory offers valuable insights into the quality of leader–follower exchanges, its

dyadic structure may limit its explanatory power in RL contexts, where influence and accountability extend across multiple stakeholder relationships. A polyadic lens may be necessary to capture the relational complexity inherent in RL.

Organizational mechanisms (ethical climate embedding and ESG governance structures): at the macro-organizational level, we focus on two structural mechanisms through which RL is enacted: ethical climate embedding and ESG governance frameworks. These mechanisms refer to the cultural and procedural factors that shape leadership behaviors, influence decision-making, and drive performance aligned with responsible business outcomes. Organizational mechanisms encompass cultural, structural, strategic and governance dimensions that collectively embed RL into the fabric of organizational operations. Our literature review identifies ethical climate embedding as a key organizational condition for RL. Across multiple studies in our dataset, ethical climate was consistently linked to strategic decision-making, stakeholder responsiveness, and sustainability integration (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2021, Haque et al., Javed et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024; Yasin, 2021). Operational indicators included board-level sustainability oversight, ethics committees, and strategic alignment with stakeholder values. For example, Akhtar et al. (2021) demonstrate that responsible leaders who institutionalize ethical norms and sustainability priorities foster cultures where RL is not only encouraged but expected. These findings reinforce the role of organizational culture in shaping leadership practices that prioritize long-term value creation and accountability. Structural mechanisms, such as ESG governance frameworks further institutionalize RL by embedding sustainability into formal oversight structures. These include ESG committees, board-level sustainability mandates, and integrated reporting systems that align decision-making with social and environmental priorities (Javed et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Such mechanisms ensure that RL is not episodic but systematically reinforced through governance architecture. Several theoretical frameworks help explain how these mechanisms operate. Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 1985) suggests that leaders shape culture through artifacts, values, and assumptions, embedding ethical norms into daily routines. Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) highlights how external pressures from stakeholders and regulations drive ethical adoption. Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) emphasizes that decision-making accounts for diverse stakeholder interests, integrating ethical and sustainable inclusive decision-making that integrates diverse interests. The Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991) positions sustainability as a strategic capability, while Triple Bottom Line Framework (Elkington, 1997) encourages alignment of economic, social, and environmental goals through leadership influence.

Social and institutional mechanisms (regulatory pressure and normative social expectations): at the macro level, RL is shaped by two dominant causal mechanisms, regulatory pressure, and normative social expectations. These mechanisms operate externally to organizations and reflect broader societal and institutional forces that influence leadership behavior, ethical decision-making, and the enactment of responsible business practices. They embed expectations, norms, and constraints into organizational frameworks, thereby conditioning the strategic and ethical responses of leaders. Regulatory pressure refers to formal institutional demands, particularly salient in highly regulated industries, where leaders are compelled to allocate resources toward compliance and ethical governance. This mechanism is evident across multiple RL studies, including those by Miska and Mendenhall (2018), Sargam and Pandey (2023), and Voegtlin et al. (2012), which demonstrate how legal and institutional frameworks shape the integration of ethical values into organizational structures. For instance, Ahmed et al. (2023) emphasize the role of legal systems in embedding ethical principles within governance mechanisms. Sargam and Pandey (2023) further illustrate how leaders respond to institutional pressures not merely through compliance, but by exercising strategic discretion and adaptation. As they note, "due to their historical existence and higher involvement in nation and

institution building, these leaders gained public and political legitimacy; required to influence and control the institutional pressures and exercise discretion in their policies and practices" (Sargam & Pandey, 2023, p. 774). This underscores the dynamic interplay between institutional constraints and leadership agency in navigating regulatory environments. In parallel, normative social expectations function as informal yet influential forces that shape leaders' ethical orientations. These expectations arise from industry standards, peer benchmarking, and societal norms surrounding corporate social responsibility. Leaders often align their strategic choices with these expectations to maintain legitimacy and public trust. As Miska and Mendenhall (2018) suggest, normative pressures encourage alignment with broader societal values, prompting leaders to internalize and enact responsible behaviors that resonate with stakeholder expectations. Theoretical frameworks that elucidate these mechanisms include Institutional Theory, which explains organizational conformity to normative and regulatory pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); Agency Theory, which highlights the role of governance structures in ensuring accountability and ethical compliance (Jensen & Meckling, 1976); and Corporate Governance Theory, which examines how firms integrate regulatory demands into leadership decision-making to meet investor and societal expectations (Shleifer & Vishny, 1997). Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995) further argues that organizations shape their strategies to align with societal norms, thereby securing public trust and long-term acceptance. Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and Social Norms Theory (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) offer additional insights into how leaders respond to the expectations of diverse stakeholder groups and prevailing ethical standards within their industries.

To elucidate how RL is enacted across diverse contexts, Table 6 synthesizes key mechanisms operating at four analytical levels—micro (individual, psychological), meso (interpersonal, relational), macro-organizational, and macro-environmental. Each mechanism is theoretically grounded and empirically supported, illustrating how individual cognition, interpersonal dynamics, institutional structures, and societal pressures jointly shape ethical decision-making and stakeholder-oriented leadership. This multilevel framework clarifies the causal pathways through which RL is activated and sustained, offering a robust foundation for both theoretical integration and practical application.

4.2. Motive, Mode, mindset (MMM) dimensions of RL

In this section we adopted the approach to defining a holistic leadership approach based on Eva et al. (2019) who suggested three features that make up the essence of leadership theory, namely its motive, mode, and mindset. These dimensions can be used for articulating the theoretical distinctiveness of RL compared to other values-centered leadership theories such as ethical, authentic, servant, or transformational theories of leadership. The dimensions of motive, mode and mindset in RL have emerged as key themes in how RL is characterized in studies within our dataset. RL can be understood through three overarching features that capture its essence.

Motive refers to the ethical intent and principles guiding leaders. Responsible leaders are motivated by a desire to serve society and uphold ethical standards. Their actions are shaped by moral principles, as they view themselves as agents of societal improvement (Pless & Maak, 2009). These leaders aim to protect the long-term interests of all stakeholders, including future generations (Haque et al., 2019). Building on this understanding of leadership motive, we propose the following theoretical claims to articulate how ethical intent, and moral principles influence RL behavior and its impact on stakeholders:

Proposition 1 Leaders who possess strong ethical intent and moral principles are more likely to engage in decision-making that prioritizes long-term stakeholder interests over short-term organizational gains.

Proposition 2: The integration of sustainable practices and ethical values into leadership motive positively influences followers' attitudes toward social responsibility and ethical conduct.

Table 6
Multilevel mechanisms supporting responsible leadership: psychological, relational, macro-organizational, and macro-environmental drivers.

Level	Mechanism	Functional role	Theoretical background	Selected empirical grounding
Micro	Moral identity activation Cognitive framing	Anchors ethical decision-making in self-concept Shapes interpretation of dilemmas	Moral Identity Theory (Blasi, 1980)Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971)Cognitive Framing Theory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981),	Boiral et al. (2014)Clark et al. (2014) Pless et al., (2021), Voegtlin, Walthert & Robertson (2019)
Meso	Psychological safety Leader–member exchange	Enables ethical voice and whistleblowing Builds trust-based ethical relationships	Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Kahn, 1990) LMX Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995),	Akhtar et al. (2021) Bashir, Memon & Muenjohn (2025) Clark et al. (2014) Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011)Inam et al. (2021) Maak & Pless (2006) Nicholson & Kurucz (2019)Özkan, Huertas-Valdivia & Üzüm (2023) Voegtlin et al. (2012)
Macro-Org	Ethical climate embedding ESG governance structures	Institutionalizes ethical norms Aligns leadership with sustainability goals	Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 1985) Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991) Triple Bottom Line Framework (Elkington, 1997)	Akhtar et al. (2021) Haque et al. (2019)Javed et al. (2020) Wang et al. (2021)Yasin (2021)
Macro-Env	Regulatory pressures Normative social expectations	Enforces ethical compliance Shapes legitimacy and strategic choices	Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) Agency Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) Corporate Governance Theory (Shleifer & Vishny, 1997) Legitimacy Theory (Suchman,	Ahmed et al. (2023) Miska & Mendenhall (2018) Sargam and Pandey (2023) Voegtlin et al. (2012),

Table 6 (*continued*)

Level	Mechanism	Functional role	Theoretical background	Selected empirical grounding
			1995) Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984)Social Norms Theory (Cialdini & Trost, 1998)	

Source: Authors.

Mode pertains to the relational and operational approach to leadership, specifically how leadership is enacted. RL is operationalized through stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes. Leaders emphasize transparency, ethical considerations, and the inclusion of diverse stakeholder perspectives in their leadership practices (Coldwell et al., 2012). Additionally, RL encourages collaboration across organizational and societal boundaries to create shared benefits for both the organization and the community (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The mode dimension delineates the operational enactment of leadership through stakeholder engagement, ethical decision-making, and cross-boundary collaboration. These practices not only reflect the relational essence of RL but also serve as mechanisms through which inclusive cultures and organizational legitimacy are cultivated. The following propositions articulate the expected outcomes of these operational modes:

Proposition 3 RL practices that emphasize stakeholder engagement and transparency in decision-making foster inclusive organizational cultures and collaborative behavior.

Proposition 4: Cross-boundary collaboration, as operational mode of RL, enhances organizational legitimacy and stakeholder trust.

Mindset refers to the values and long-term cognitive orientation of the leader's, focusing on sustainability and global perspective. The mindset of RL fosters a commitment to sustainability and the long-term well-being of both organizational and societal stakeholders (Ansong et al., 2022). Responsible leaders adopt a cosmopolitan or global mindset, often seeing themselves as "global citizens" dedicated to improving the world through ethical and sustainable leadership practices (Levy et al., 2007; Maak & Pless, 2009; Hoyer & Ybema, 2025). Grounded in the literature on global values (e.g., Taylor & Yang, 2015), the mindset dimension of RL reveals how ethical and global perspectives shape strategic intent. At the same time, Waldman et al. (2019) note that leadership embodies paradox: responsibility and irresponsibility, distance and closeness, uniformity and individualism, control and autonomy, nationalism and globalism—each shaped by values, context, and the growing complexity of global organizational dynamics and therefore leaders may adopt a paradox mindset being driven by contradicting forces. The following propositions articulate the behavioral implications of this mindset in guiding responsible decision-making and balancing stakeholder interests:

Proposition 5 Having a global leadership mindset increases the likelihood of leaders adopting sustainability-focused strategic decisions.

Proposition 6: Leaders who internalize long-term ethical orientation are more likely to balance organizational goals with societal and environmental responsibilities.

Fig. 4 outlines the core components of RL through three dimensions: motive, mode, and mindset. The motive dimension emphasizes the ethical orientation of leaders and their commitment to societal betterment, driven by moral principles and a desire to serve all stakeholders. This includes important aspects such as leader attributes, ethical decision-making, the integration of ethical values and sustainable practices, and their impact on followers' attitudes. The mode dimension focuses on the operational aspects of RL, highlighting the integration of stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes, resource

allocation, and strategic choices that prioritize transparency and ethical considerations. This dimension encompasses organizational culture, resource allocation, and the influence of leadership on followers' behavior. The mindset dimension underscores the significance of a leader's values and ethical perspectives, promoting a commitment to sustainability and long-term well-being for both organizational and societal stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2009; Waldman et al., 2020). This includes stakeholder expectations, external pressures, social influences, strategic decisions, and the effect on leaders. Together, these dimensions illustrate how RL balances ethical behavior, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable practices to create a positive impact at various levels of an organization.

RL encompasses various dimensions, including ethical, relational, social, and environmental aspects. Responsible leaders strive to balance the needs of diverse stakeholders while advancing organizational goals in a way that is both sustainable and socially responsible (Voegtlin, 2011). In summary, RL can be understood as an ethical and relational leadership approach that emphasizes moral responsibility and focused on the collective well-being of stakeholders and society. This holistic perspective makes RL essential for tackling complex societal and environmental challenges, highlighting its significance in contemporary organizational leadership.

5. Future directions of research

This section further addresses RQ3 by identifying gaps in the existing literature on RL and outlines potential directions for future research. The study of RL, which involves managing a firm's interactions with society to address stakeholder concerns and enhance economic, social, and environmental performance, has become increasingly important in business practice. Furthermore, it holds significant relevance for future research in management (Pless, 2023).

5.1. Theoretical development

Advancing theoretical clarity: Future research on RL should aim to create a cohesive and comprehensive theoretical framework. Given the current fragmented understanding of RL, scholars must aim to further empirically investigate various leadership theories—including ethical, authentic, transformational, and servant leadership theories—to establish RL as a distinct construct. For example, Eva et al. (2019) emphasizes the significance of conceptual clarity in differentiating value-based leadership approaches from each other, for example, RL from servant leadership. Additionally, developing a unified definition and clear conceptual boundaries for RL will help create a robust theoretical foundation that can guide future empirical studies. To enhance the conceptual development of RL, future research should critically engage with existing theoretical frameworks. For instance, Waldman, Siegel, and Stahl (2020) observed that there remains a lack of clear metrics for RL that directly capture the attributes of individual leaders. Methodologically and empirically the distinctiveness of RL can be addressed by using validated or new measurement scales that differentiate RL from other leadership theories. Survey tools or structured assessments can empirically test RL's unique dimensions in leadership contexts, in particular by surveying experts using validated instruments—including Responsible Leadership Scale (Voegtlin, 2011), Ethical Leadership Scale (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005), the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Walumbwa et al., 2008), Servant Leadership Scale (Liden et al., 2008), and Transformational Leadership Inventory (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Besides the RL theory other theories with firm and societal level of analysis such as stakeholder theory and institutional theory show notable recurrence, reinforcing this macro-level emphasis. However, research has also drawn on alternative theoretical frameworks to examine RL, and future studies should continue to build on these diverse perspectives. Yet, theories such as self-determination, identity work, neo-Aristotelian/virtue ethics and social cognitive

neuroscience—though less frequently used—point to emerging interest in micro- and *meso*-level dynamics. These underexplored levels offer fertile ground for future research, especially to uncover the psychological, relational, and behavioral mechanisms that drive responsible leadership in practice. A more balanced theoretical landscape would deepen our understanding of how RL is enacted and experienced across diverse organizational layers. Another theoretical contextual and temporal aspect warranting exploration is the boundary conditions of RL theory, which is when, where, and for whom RL is most effective or may need adaptation (Busse, Kach & Wagner, 2017). This review revealed the following boundary conditions of RL. First the effectiveness of RL varies across cultural contexts. In collectivist cultures, where social responsibility and group harmony are prioritized, RL tends to resonate more strongly and yield greater impact. Literature often focuses on this boundary condition in relation to national culture (e.g., PIan et al., 2021). Conversely, in highly individualistic cultures, its influence may be attenuated or necessitate alternative framing to align with prevailing values of autonomy and personal achievement. We propose future research directions on this topic in Section 5.4 of this article. Second boundary condition of RL is stakeholders' characteristics. Individuals and societies with high moral identity and intrinsic values (e.g., purpose, sustainability) may be more receptive to RL's messages than individuals with while extrinsically motivated individuals may require different incentives (e.g., Solinger et al., 2020). Third, RL strives in some organizational cultures that support transparency, stakeholder engagement, and long-term thinking. In short-term, profit-driven cultures, its effects may be muted or resisted. Fourth, certain leadership roles may facilitate RL, for example, leaders with more formal authority. Finally, temporal boundary conditions of RL include stable periods, where there is more room for stakeholder dialogue and ethical reflection in comparison to period during crises, when RL may be challenged by the need for urgent decision-making and competing priorities. Potential research questions advancing theoretical clarity of RL may include: *To what extent is RL a statistically and behaviorally distinct construct from ethical, authentic, servant, and transformational leadership? To what extent does RL provide unique value beyond stakeholder considerations when compared to ethical leadership? What specific aspects of leaders' behavior and decision-making should be assessed in measures of responsible leadership, and how should these assessments be conducted?*

Conducting multi-level studies: Research in RL is intricately linked to CSR and stakeholder theory, which primarily emphasize organizational and societal contexts. This highlights a growing interest in understanding how responsible leadership impacts institutional outcomes, corporate performance, and stakeholder engagement. However, there is a significant gap in existing literature on this topic. Much of the current research reviewed is heavily influenced by macro-level theories, including stakeholder and institutional theories. In contrast, there are few empirical studies that investigate RL outcomes at the meso and micro levels, focusing on individuals—such as leaders, followers, or students in leadership programs—as the primary unit of analysis. Although the theoretical perspectives of RL strive to address multiple levels of analysis, the dominant focus remains on the macro level. Future research should explore the impact of RL on various organizational outcomes at multiple levels, including employee well-being, organizational performance, stakeholder relations, and social and environmental effects. As RL is a multi-level phenomenon, future research could integrate empirical multi-level analytical approaches based on multi-level modeling, to examine RL at individual, team, organizational, and societal levels. We suggest potential research questions which can be applied at various levels of RL leadership analysis: *How does RL influence employee well-being and ethical decision-making at the individual level? (micro-level). How does RL affect team cohesion and performance in cross-functional or diverse teams? (meso-level). What is the relationship between RL at the firm level and organizational responses to social and environmental challenges? (macro-level). Through what mechanisms do individual perceptions of RL contribute to shift in organizational ethical norms and stakeholder*

trust? (cross-level integration).

Investigating potential limitations and unintended consequences: while studies have extensively explored RL, comparatively less attention has been given to the contradictory aspects of RL. Investigating potential limitations such as lack of the antecedents of responsible leadership (e. g., certain personal values) as noted by Waldman, Siegel and Stahl (2020) or the 'dark side' of RL—such as irresponsible leadership practices and conflicts between leadership actions and business goals (Veetikazhi et al., 2023) or perceptions of leader insincerity (Dasborough et al., 2009) that can undermine the trust in responsible leadership—could provide valuable insights. Literature also raises another important question: leaders may embody both responsible and irresponsible traits simultaneously, influenced by personal values and situational factors, highlighting the complexity and ethical tensions inherent in modern leadership behavior (Waldman, Siegel & Stahl, 2020). To investigate the 'dark side' of RL, empirical research could apply mixed-method approaches (e.g., interviews in combination with behavioral experiments) to examine RL's unintended consequences, including perceived insincerity or conflicts with business objectives. We also suggest conducting quantitative analyses comparing RL with existing leadership models using Structural Equation Modeling or *meta*-analyses. *Potential research questions: How does perceived leader insincerity affect employee trust and engagement in organizations committed to responsible leadership? Which personal values positively influence RL mindsets and motivations? To what extent can responsible and irresponsible leadership traits coexist within the same individual, and how are they influenced by personal values and contextual factors?*

5.2. Methodological improvements

Enhancing methodological diversity: Most of the papers examined in our literature review are conceptual in nature, with relatively few employing empirical methodologies. For instance, Pathak and Jha (2024) pointed out significant gaps in RL research, such as the limited use of empirical data and the importance of rigorous empirical studies to enhance the understanding of RL in diverse organizational contexts. To advance the study of RL, researchers should adopt a diverse range of methodological approaches depending on the research question. Researchers can assess the conceptual boundaries between RL and adjacent leadership theories by using the Confirmatory Factor Analysis to confirm that RL's constructs are empirically distinct and valid, while Structural Equation Modeling can be used to explore interrelationships and predictive power, offering robust evidence for RL's unique behavioral and theoretical dimensions. While qualitative and quantitative methods have been the primary focus, there is a pressing need for additional conceptual and mixed-methods studies to enrich the literature and provide empirical validation along with comprehensive insights. Experimental designs and field studies can offer causal evidence regarding the impact of RL practices. For instance, behavioral experiments could assess how leaders respond to ethical dilemmas in controlled settings. Studies should explore stakeholder impact measurement tools, integrating social responsibility indicators into RL assessment frameworks. Moreover, there is a need for more longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of RL on organizational outcomes. Such research can shed light on how RL practices evolve over time and their sustained impact on employee well-being, organizational performance, and stakeholder relations. Additionally, employing multi-method approaches that combine both qualitative and quantitative data can provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of RL. For example, utilizing case studies, interviews, and surveys in conjunction can help explore the lived experiences of responsible leaders and their followers, offering a holistic view of RL in practice. Using advanced computational methods, such as agent-based modeling (ABM) (Wu, Ohya & Sekiguchi, 2024) can further advance RL domain. ABM is a comparatively recent methodological innovation that enables to simulate and analyze complex systems made up of heterogenous agents (e.g., leaders, employees,

external stakeholders) with distinct goals and decision rules. This approach facilitates the examination of how individual behaviors and interactions collectively influence system-level dynamics (Serban et al., 2015). This method offers a promising approach for simulating the effects of RL on decision-making dynamics. By modeling individual agents with distinct behavioral rules and interaction patterns, this method enables the exploration of emergent leadership outcomes under varying ethical, organizational, and stakeholder conditions. ABM can capture dynamic interactions and systemic effects, which are central to RL in multi-actor environments. A concrete example of an RL scenario could involve simulating stakeholder dynamics in the context of climate governance.

5.3. Practical implementation

Exploring effective organizational training practices: Many of the papers reviewed in our literature analysis tend to contribute to theoretical contributions. This emphasis highlights the gap between research in RL and its practical application, pointing to opportunities for future research. For instance, Frangieh and Yaacoub (2017) emphasized the need for additional empirical research to investigate the effects of RL on various business dimensions, noting the lack of practical guidance. Future research should focus on the practical applications of RL for organizations and leaders. This involves developing practical tools and frameworks that leaders can use to implement in their organizations. RL ensures that strategic decisions are guided by a strong ethical framework, prioritizing integrity, and transparency. It also incorporates environmental and social considerations into the strategy, promoting sustainable business practices. By understanding the tools and frameworks associated with RL, organizations can optimize resource allocation at the organisational level and avoid failure in achieving their strategic objectives. Furthermore, research should examine how RL can be integrated into leadership development programs and training initiatives to prepare future leaders to address the ethical, social, and environmental challenges they may encounter. By providing actionable insights and practical recommendations, future research can bridge the gap between theory and practice, making RL more accessible and applicable in real-world settings. More research is particularly necessary concerning team dynamics. Future studies should focus on how RL influences team cohesion, collaboration, and performance. Investigating the mechanisms through which responsible leaders foster positive team environments can provide deeper insight into the relational processes that underpin effective leadership. Examining how RL practices impact team trust, conflict resolution, and collective efficacy could offer valuable contributions to understanding the *meso*-level dynamics of RL. *Potential research questions to investigate effective organizational training practices may include: How do different training methodologies (e.g., experiential learning, mentorship, case-based simulations) impact RL adoption among leaders? What competencies should RL-focused leadership programs emphasize to equip leaders with the ability to navigate ethical dilemmas, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability challenges?*

Future research should explore how RL can be effectively integrated into leadership development programs and training initiatives. This includes identifying best practices for cultivating responsible leaders and evaluating the impact of these programs on leadership behavior and organizational outcomes. Research should investigate the most effective pedagogical approaches for teaching RL, such as experiential learning, mentorship, and reflective practices. By providing actionable insights and practical recommendations, future studies can bridge the gap between theory and practice, making RL more accessible and applicable in real-world settings. *Potential research questions may include the following: What role does RL play in shaping the relationship between ethical climate and employee well-being or moral disengagement? How does RL influence the relationship between ethical climate and employee green behavior? How does RL moderate the relationship between team diversity and adaptability in crisis contexts?*

5.4. Contextual expansion

Investigating RL in non-Western context: This study demonstrates that research on RL has primarily been conducted in private Western contexts, especially in the United States and Europe (Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014). This geographical concentration may introduce biases in the existing literature, as the cultural and organizational environments in these regions differ significantly from those in other parts of the world. Consequently, our current understanding of RL may be overly centered on Western perspectives, potentially overlooking the unique challenges and practices found in non-Western contexts. For example, Hincapie and Sánchez (2022) noted the scarcity of research on RL in Latin America and emphasized the need for studies that consider the distinctive characteristics of developing economies. Future research should also investigate how RL is practiced and perceived in diverse cultural settings, including Western and Central Asia, and Africa. This exploration can uncover unique challenges and opportunities for implementing RL in various cultural environments. Potential research questions: *How do cultural and institutional differences shape the implementation and perception of RL in Western versus non-Western countries? How do leadership values and stakeholder engagement strategies differ in collectivist and individualistic cultures in the practice of RL?*

Exploring a broad range of industries and technological advancements: Future research should explore the implications of RL across various industries and technological advancements as different sectors face unique ethical, social, and environmental challenges that impact how RL is applied. By investigating RL outcomes empirically across different sectors, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of its effectiveness in various contexts. Sector-specific studies, particularly in areas such as energy, healthcare, education, and technology, can offer valuable insights into how RL is implemented in diverse organizational contexts. By identifying industry-specific drivers and barriers to RL, organizations can develop leadership strategies that are relevant to their circumstances and align with their operational and ethical priorities. Moreover, expanding discussions to include emerging technological contexts—such as digital industries, remote and hybrid teams, or AI-driven workplaces—will enhance the relevance and originality of future research agendas. Additionally, developing new theoretical models that integrate emerging concepts like digital leadership and ethical AI can provide fresh perspectives on practicing RL in the digital age. Potential research questions: *What role does RL play in promoting ethical AI development and responsible data governance? What barriers prevent organizations in extractive industries (e.g., oil and gas industry) from fully adopting RL?*

Investigating diverse organization forms: In the field of business and management, it is crucial to generate knowledge that empowers various types of organizations—whether they are academic, large corporate, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), governmental, nonprofit, or part of civil society—to act as positive agents of change in pursuit of a better world (Tsui, 2021). While some efforts have been made to apply RL theory to large organizations, future research could further explore its relevance to SMEs and public sector institutions. Future studies can address this gap by integrating empirical studies and real-world applications to demonstrate how RL principles can be translated into effective organizational practices and societal impact. Potential research questions: *What factors influence the effectiveness of RL in SMEs and family-owned firms in comparison to large firms?*

6. Conclusion

RL is an emerging construct in leadership theory, notable for its multi-level relevance across individual, organizational, and societal domains. A comprehensive review of empirical research on RL is essential for advancing the management field, given RL's complex nature and its considerable influence on organizational dynamics. Our systematic review offers an in-depth analysis of current RL scholarship,

identifying its normative foundational pillars—ethical orientation, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and commitment to sustainability—which distinguish it from traditional leadership models. This review contributes to the understanding of the key descriptive and intellectual contours of RL research, which is detailed in Section 3. Section 4 further advances the field by offering content-based recommendations for future inquiry. Beyond these contributions, our review introduces new theoretical developments grounded in the findings presented in Section 5. Specifically, we offer a novel integration of the ADO framework and the MMM dimensional analysis of RL, enhancing conceptual clarity and synthesizing diverse perspectives into a cohesive model. While the ADO framework has been applied in other domains (e.g., Deng, 2012; Paul and Benito, 2018) as a systematic tool for literature reviews, this study is the first to apply it specifically to RL scholarship. The primary theoretical contribution of our SLR is the combination of the ADO and MMM frameworks. The ADO framework provides a structured and dynamic approach to understanding RL by categorizing its core elements into antecedents (e.g., stakeholder expectations), decisions (e.g., ethical decision-making), and outcomes (e.g., organizational performance). These categories help reconcile RL's foundational pillars and offer a coherent structure for future theoretical development. The integration of ADO and MMM frameworks not only clarifies RL's conceptual boundaries but also positions it as a boundary-spanning mechanism within leadership scholarship. For instance, the motive aspect has been addressed by Pless and Maak (2009) and Haque et al. (2019), while the mode has been explored by Coldwell et al. (2012) and Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011). The mindset dimension has been examined by Ansong et al. (2022), Maak and Pless (2009) and Waldman et al. (2020). Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for theorizing RL as a multidimensional construct.

Our review further demonstrates that RL research spans multiple levels and outcomes. This suggests that any comprehensive theory of RL must be multi-level in nature, integrating individual ethical decision-making with organizational culture and stakeholder theory. This review also highlights that RL is associated with enhanced workforce performance, including increased motivation, employee commitment, creativity, team effectiveness, and positive organizational culture. Rooted in ethical principles and a commitment to sustainability, RL emerges as a unifying concept that bridges ethical leadership with strategic performance outcomes. This review repositions RL as a distinct yet integrative construct that connects normative and performance logics in leadership studies. Moreover, this literature review finds that while RL shares some similarities with other leadership theories, it differs significantly in scope and emphasis. Its multi-level approach extends beyond an emphasis on individual growth, empowerment, and employee well-being as discussed in Section 3.2, offering a broader framework for addressing contemporary organizational and societal challenges.

Finally, this study not only advances theoretical understanding of RL but also provides practical implications for organizations and society. These findings hold significant value for practitioners, demonstrating how RL can shape organizational culture, stakeholder engagement, and ethical decision-making. Managers and executives can leverage these insights to refine leadership development programs by embedding RL antecedents—such as stakeholder expectations and ethical decision-making—into concrete practices. For example, organizations might implement 360-degree feedback systems that include stakeholder perspectives, integrate ethical reasoning modules into executive training, and establish cross-functional sustainability task forces to align leadership decisions with long-term societal goals. To foster RL internally, companies should cultivate a supportive organizational culture that prioritizes transparency, ethics, and stakeholder inclusion. This can be operationalized through interventions such as stakeholder mapping workshops, ethics-based performance metrics, and inclusive decision-making protocols that engage employees and external partners. These practices help leaders respond adaptively to evolving stakeholder

expectations and external pressures, reinforcing long-term organizational trust and effectiveness. Beyond organizational boundaries, RL-oriented organizations contribute to societal well-being by promoting ethical decision-making, stakeholder inclusivity, and sustainable business practices. These efforts enhance public trust and align with global frameworks such as the UN SDGs. This broader impact strengthens the role of businesses as agents of positive societal change, reinforcing their long-term legitimacy and relevance beyond immediate corporate objectives.

Like any research, our study has its limitations. For instance, the selection criteria used to ensure the high quality of conclusions—such as focusing on reputable academic journals—may have resulted in the exclusion of potentially relevant studies, including dissertations, books, or lesser-known journals. Additionally, the emphasis on English-language literature may have narrowed the scope of our research. Future studies could expand on this by incorporating literature in other languages, such as Chinese. We acknowledge that some relevant and high-quality publications may have been unintentionally overlooked in this study.

In conclusion, RL represents a holistic and ethical approach to leadership that is increasingly significant in today's complex global landscape. By fostering ethical behavior, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability, responsible leaders can effectively navigate the challenges of modern business environments and contribute positively to society. As research in this area advances, addressing existing gaps and exploring new avenues will be crucial for enhancing our understanding and implementation of RL. Future research should explore RL's role in mediating tensions between global accountability norms and local performance demands, particularly in complex or transitional environments.

7. Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work the authors didn't use any generative AI technologies.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Irina Heim: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Benjamin Laker:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Seyed Javad Tabaeifard:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Funding

No funding has been received for this project.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A

To facilitate the review process, we implemented six inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1 and Fig. 1), ensuring relevance, quality, and academic rigor. First, to ensure uniform data interpretation and accessibility, we only considered English-language articles, which reduced our dataset to 560 studies for this review. Second, over the last two decades, RL has become a significant leadership theory (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). To capture this evolution, we designed the review process to include articles published between 2004 and 2024, reflecting

the most recent and relevant developments in the field. This 20-year period allows for a longitudinal perspective on the evolution of RL in both academic research and practical application, resulting in a dataset to 546 articles. Third, we concentrated on studies published in journals rated at 2 stars and above according to the Academic Journal Guide (AJG), issued by the Association of Business Schools (ABS). The AJG is widely recognized as a standard reference for identifying journals that meet global academic criteria (Paul & Benito, 2018).

Fourth, focusing the analysis on original research, only journal articles were included in the review. This decision was made to exclude other types of academic writing, such as conference proceedings and book chapters, which are typically non-peer-reviewed publications. By narrowing the search to journal articles, the number of studies in our dataset reduced to 475. This step ensures that the review is based on original research contributions, which typically provide detailed data, methodologies, and insights into the research topic. Fifth, the review specifically focused on the business and management category to align with the core disciplinary context of RL. This category includes journals that examine leadership dynamics, strategy, organizational behavior, ethics, corporate responsibility, and sustainability, all of which are central to the concept of RL. As a result, the dataset was narrowed down to 290 articles published across 132 journals, providing a rich and diverse array of perspectives on RL within the business context. Sixth, to ensure that the review includes only high-quality, impactful research, we further refined the dataset based on the ABS Journal Quality Guide. To guarantee that the studies selected for the review underwent rigorous review processes in reputable outlets, we included only articles from journals rated two stars or above. By prioritizing articles from higher-rated journals, the review focuses on innovative, rigorously reviewed studies that have significantly advanced the field of RL. This emphasis on journal quality enhances the credibility and relevance of the findings. Additionally, we included in the analysis the *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, a one-star journal according to the ABS, due to its significant contribution and the notable number of relevant papers on RL. The application of this final inclusion criterion reduced the dataset from 290 to 140 articles, spanning fifty-three journals. After applying the inclusion criteria, thoroughly reviewed the full texts of these 140 articles. Once we finalized the dataset, a structured data extraction process was initiated. We systematically recorded key variables, including author(s), year of publication, journal, research design, methodology, key findings, and theoretical frameworks. This approach enabled a comprehensive comparison of the different studies and their contributions to the field of RL. Additionally, the analysis focused on identifying trends in the literature, such as the most common research methodologies and geographical focuses, as well as potential gaps for future research.

Data availability

The data are included in the manuscript.

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