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## CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

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**ABSTRACT.** Sustainability today ranks as one of the most important requirements for the operation of organisations. There is a wealth of research on the subject, but few studies have addressed the requirements of sustainability management. This study fills this gap. It aims to examine the reported practices of SME managers in three nations to assess their preparedness as regards sustainability leadership expectations. In-depth interviews with Hungarian (36), Polish (32) and Slovakian (30) SME managers were conducted using the Voyant Tools method. Among the web-based statistical analysis and visualisation software tools, Document Terms, Word Clouds, WordTree, Trends, Context, StreamGraph, ScatterPlot (t-SNE analysis, Correspondence Analysis), Correlations, and Significance were used. Ethical style, long-term planning, and elements of culture (trust, knowledge sharing, teamwork) that best qualify sustainability leadership were examined. The results show that SME managers still conduct their leadership in the spirit of traditional thinking, in a democratic style according to their assessment. Although they think about the long term, they lack vision. Building trust, a prerequisite for knowledge sharing and teamwork, appears to be difficult. Overall, the requirements of sustainable leadership are applied at different levels but are not yet common practice in any of the nations examined.

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## Introduction

Addressing the conditions for sustainability is one of the key challenges of the 21st century. In 2015, the document 'Transforming our World: a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' highlighted the critical state of sustainability. Also in 2015, 193 UN member states adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to take collective responsibility. These SDGs call for action at all levels (society, organisations, individuals) to achieve sustainable development (Cesário et al., 2022; Fitriani & Rambe, 2024). These SDGs are not primarily focused on solving problems related to climate and environmental change but interpret the necessary actions in a much broader sense (health, well-being, inequality, poverty

eradication, etc.). The SDGs can be achieved if organisations accept the challenges of sustainable development and see it as an opportunity. This often implies a change in business models (Tideman et al., 2013), something which goes hand in hand with a new culture, a change in mindset and outlook, the building of new economic processes and a new basis for management (Amoah et al., 2022). Organisations that prefer to adopt new and sustainable goals need sustainability leaders (Barut-Meltem, 2017). Sustainability leadership is not only about improving business results. It is an approach and practice that focuses on the social responsibility of organisations, environmental sustainability, employee well-being and ethical business decisions (Dos Santos & Ahmad, 2020; Khan et al., 2023; Betakova et al., 2023). Research on the topic is still in its infancy, with only a few studies addressing the practical feasibility of sustainability leadership and its problems (Visser & Courtice, 2011; Suriyankietkaew, 2022; London Premier Centre, 2023).

As there are very few studies in the literature on the need for and practice of sustainable management, this paper aims to fill this research gap and explore the practical application of the principles of sustainable management. For organisations to operate sustainably, it is essential to employ managers with competencies and knowledge who understand and can follow the requirements of sustainable organisational operation in their decisions. Drawing on theoretical research, this study examines the models that most influence sustainable organisational performance and tests these assumptions on the ground. This includes sustainability management, which focuses on the balanced development of the economy, society and the environment. It helps organisations to achieve profitable growth while meeting sustainability objectives. The key characteristics that are necessary for a sustainability leader to manage his or her organisation towards the achievement of sustainability goals can be identified (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011).

Our research questions focus on organisational readiness in addition to the evaluation of leadership. We have tried to formulate them in a way that we can assess the behaviour, value judgements and decision preferences of managers who prefer sustainable operations, which are characteristics that indicate the level of organisational preparedness.

*Q1* Which is the most commonly used management style according to the self-report of the SME managers surveyed?

*Q2* How important do you think it is to uphold ethical standards?

*Q3* Is the long-term thinking embodied in the vision statement valid?

*Q4* To what extent are team-building, knowledge sharing and trust used to shape the culture?

The research aims to answer the research questions through the examples of three countries. We endeavour to show to what extent the basic elements of sustainability leadership (sustainability leadership style, vision/long-term planning, and organisational culture building (trust building, teamwork and knowledge sharing)) are implemented in the practice of SMEs in these countries under today's management conditions. In the following chapters, after a theoretical overview, the results of the research are presented, followed by a discussion and a summary.

## **1. Literature review**

### ***1.1. Sustainability***

The idea of sustainability is not new. It has been a part of the traditions and cultural norms of societies around the world for centuries (Sakalasooriya, 2021). Sustainability, as we understand it today, was first coined in 1972 and is one of the most commonly used terms today

to describe the way organisations operate. It includes the environmental management of management, the expected behaviour of managers and employees and organisational values and mindsets (Folke, 2003). Sustainability in business is about reducing or avoiding unsustainable business models that have negative impacts on the environment and society (Bocken, 2021). Sustainability is a global problem, present in the world economy, affecting and preoccupying all countries of the world, but effective solutions have not yet been found.

### ***1.2. Leadership***

The roots of leadership as a discipline go back to the beginning of civilisation. Egyptian rulers, Greek heroes and biblical patriarchs had one thing in common - leadership (Bencsik et al., 2018). Its definition and analysis only began to be studied in the 1800s (Benmira, 2021). The first theories of leadership date back to this period.

There are many definitions of leadership, but despite the different approaches, there are several common elements. Leadership can be interpersonal, goal- and action-oriented (Mintzberg, 2023), cognitive, exemplary, entrepreneurial, structural (Lieverink & Wurczel, 2017), ethical, sustainable, considerate and servant (Harris, 2003). As a further addition, Yukl (1989) presents in his research various leadership personality traits, styles, mindsets, and constraints based on different leadership models. Jain and Prekumar (2010) used the following list: conservative, entrepreneurial, professional, bureaucratic, organic, intuitive, familial, altruistic and innovative. Other approaches include environment-specific leadership, transformational leadership (Robertson & Barling, 2013; Potjanajaruwit, 2023), servant leadership, visionary leadership, affiliative-connective leadership, pacing leadership, pace-setting leadership, transformational leadership, deal-making leadership, etc. (Robbins, 2023; Jameson, 2021), ethical leadership (Kristinsson et al., 2022). The myriad of adjectives illustrates that there are as many people as there are styles, as personality traits are the actual environmental influences that make leadership decisions and behavioural patterns unique (Szabolcsi, 2016; Knezevic, 2023; Oliinyk et al., 2024).

### ***1.3. Sustainable leadership***

In addition to the numerous possibilities listed above, very few studies have addressed sustainability management and its application in organisational practice. Sustainability management combines two key aspects, the achievement of economic objectives and sustainability. In this spirit, leadership can integrate sustainability into all activities, balancing short-term goals and priorities with long-term goals (Bocken, 2021). As the world faces increasingly significant environmental, economic and social challenges, sustainability leadership is among the most important organisational and societal priorities (Kanyangale, 2023).

There is no universally accepted definition of sustainability management, but its tasks can be identified: social and environmental responsibility, long-term sustainability of organisations, ethical behaviour, people-centred working practices, continuous improvement, initiating organisational chan

and developing organisational culture. Sustainability leadership makes organisations more competitive, flexible, responsive and attractive to customers (Mahajan, 2022; Mishchuk et al., 2022; Staniek, 2023, Vovk & Vovk, 2024). Sustainability leadership is a shared responsibility that manages resources rationally and avoids damaging the environment (Hargreaves, 2012). It enables vision and appropriate strategy, builds a high-performing team,

maintains a good workplace climate and ensures team members have access to the knowledge they need (Bulmer, 2021).

Knight and Paterson's (2018) theory supports the idea that sustainability leaders are results-oriented and set objectives that support the implementation of sustainability initiatives in their organisations. Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) argue that a moral theory of the ethics of care can shed light on the ethical dimensions of leadership for sustainability. Many researchers support the importance of relational and transformational leadership theory in building effective teamwork. The social enterprise studied by Suriyankietkaew et al. (2022) values the long-term perspective over short-term gains and prioritises human resources. It fosters a strong and shared organisational culture, promotes innovation and promotes ethical behaviour for sustainability and resilience. In their study, they focused on the framework of sustainable management and the integrated theory of expected competencies in the SME sector. The research focused on responsible tourism in a small coastal fishing village in Thailand. Six categories of sustainable leadership practices and five core sustainability leadership competencies were investigated through in-depth interviews and focus groups. The results show that the participants in the study need to develop and integrate value-based practices and competencies (strategic, systems thinking, interpersonal, visionary and ethical competencies) into the way they do business.

Research by Iqbal et al. (2020) has shown a mutual positive effect between sustainable leadership, organisational learning, psychological reinforcement and sustainable performance in the SMEs studied. The results suggest that sustainability leadership and organisational learning can play an important role in improving the sustainability of organisations.

Visser and Courtice (2011) analysed the practical model of sustainability leadership in three areas, leadership environment, individual characteristics and leadership actions. In doing so, they created the Cambridge Sustainable Leadership Model. In their study, they built on the logic of the Cambridge University model and found that sustainability leadership is fraught with paradoxes. As the competitive landscape changes and global challenges evolve, companies that have been lauded as sustainability leaders in the past may become discredited in the present. Likewise, today's villains may become tomorrow's sustainability heroes. Seven characteristics of sustainability leadership have been identified: systemic understanding, emotional intelligence, value orientation, a compelling vision, an inclusive style, an innovative approach and a long-term perspective. Tideman et al. (2013) explored the leadership mindsets that leaders need to develop to encourage their organisations to create sustainable value. Based on their results, they developed a new leadership model (6C model), which consists of three new mindsets and three new skill sets. Laker (2022) wrote in *Forbes Magazine* that leaders need to find innovative ways to integrate environmental considerations into their business strategies to achieve long-term sustainability. He mentions six ways to become a sustainable leader that can help bring about changes in the way they think about the environment and their relationship with it. He believes that there is a need to move away from traditional management models towards a participatory approach that involves all stakeholders in the search for sustainable solutions. He cited the example of Finland, where recent efforts by conservationist fishing groups are balancing hydropower production with the needs of migratory fish stocks, rather than eliminating human impacts on the environment.

Avery (2005) and later Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) linked the concept of sustainable development to the managerial context and introduced the concept of sustainability leadership. Avery (2005) developed her theory from an organisational perspective, emphasising the paramount importance of sustainable development and ecological and social sustainability rather than short-term interests. Through a field study of 28 organisations, she identified 19 criteria for sustainability leadership practices. Later, together with her colleague (Avery & Bergstein, 2011), she supplemented and further developed the theory by adding 4 additional

elements. The 23 factors were arranged in a pyramidal form. This is Avery and Bergsteiner's sustainability leadership model, better known as the 'Honeybee philosophy'. It uses the society of honeybees as a metaphor to describe the sustainable functioning of organisations. The pyramid model defines criteria for sustainable management along several key factors. It emphasises, among other things, social responsibility, resource efficiency, long-term thinking, ethical behaviour and collaboration, all of which contribute to creating a sustainable and successful business model. For organisations, this means encouraging collaboration among employees and exploiting the synergies that exist within teams (Johnson, 2021).

Sustainability leadership in business is therefore an approach that aims to ensure that organisations do not focus solely on profit, but also take into account a range of other considerations. Sustainability management is not only a moral obligation, but also a key to business success. It aims to ensure that organisations build on their current situation to move towards a viable, successful future, which includes a focus on the long term and not just financial success. Organisations need to operate according to the values of a sustainable culture, and sustainability leadership can ensure this in practice.

Based on the three best-known theories presented (Tiedeman 6C model, Avery & Bergsteiner 'Honeybee philosophy', Cambridge model), we have identified the parameters that are the most important criteria for sustainable leadership and are also emphasised in the approaches mentioned above (leadership style/ethical behaviour, strategy/vision, research/trust - teamwork - knowledge sharing) (Table 1).

Table 1. How sustainable management elements are reflected in models

Author	Elements of sustainable management	Leadership style	Strategy vision	Culture
Tiedeman S., Arts M., and Zandee D., (2013)	Context			x
	Consciousness		x	
	Continuity		x	
	Connectedness	x		
	Creativity	x	x	
	Collectiveness			
Visser W. and Courtice P. (2011)	<b>Individual characteristics</b>			
	Caring /morally driven	x		
	Systemic /holistic thinker		x	
	Enquiring /open-minded		x	
	Self-aware /empathetic	x		
	Visionary /courageous	x	x	
	<b>Style</b>			
	Inclusive	x		
	Visionary	x		
	Creative	x		
	Altruistic	x		
	Radical	x		
	<b>Skills</b>			
	Manage complexity	x	x	
Communicate vision		x		
Exercise judgment	x			
Challenge and innovate		x		
Think long term		x		
Avery and Bergstein (2011)	Influencing decisions, CSR, environmental and voluntary programmes		x	
	Frequency of changes, preparedness		x	x
	Providing regular training and development opportunities		x	x
	Leadership and staff engagement			x
	Trust-building features			x
	Teamwork and knowledge sharing in the organisation			x
Talent management in the organisation, succession programme		x	x	

Author	Elements of sustainable management	Leadership style	Strategy vision	Culture
	Taking into account the interests of internal and external stakeholders		x	x
	Ethical principles, ethical leadership	x		
	Characterising your leadership style	x		
	Innovation in the organisation		x	
	Self-management, intrinsic motivation	x		
	Vision in everyday life, involvement, organisational vision		x	

*Source: own compilation*

The table shows that the Cambridge model focuses primarily on leadership style and strategy, while the other two models address all three factors in a balanced way.

Based on the theoretical foundations, we have outlined our hypotheses, which are based on the research questions formulated.

*H1 The most common leadership style preferred by the SME managers surveyed is democratic rather than embodying sustainable leadership, but the setting of ethical standards is considered less important.*

*H2 In theory, long-term thinking prevails, but in practice, only a minority of organisations have a vision.*

*H3 Team building is an important aspect of culture building, but there are problems with knowledge sharing due to a lack of trust.*

## 2. Methodology

The research was qualitative, using structured interviews. For the kind of research where there is no agreed framework, no precise definitions and where the researcher is confronted with unexplored situations, qualitative surveys provide a deeper understanding. The use of the interview technique gives the researcher the opportunity to ask questions back and to clarify rare or unknown practices. The interviewees were selected from the SME sector in three countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). The reason for choosing the three nations was that there have been several studies on Western European and Asian countries, but no research on Central and Eastern European countries could be found. The countries studied have a similar historical past, but their natural endowments, geographical location and international relations provide different conditions. Following the regime change at the end of the last century, they have followed different national strategies, although they share similar values in terms of economic and cultural benchmarks. It was therefore considered interesting to examine their level of preparedness in the most preferred field of today, organisational sustainability and the management of sustainability in their organisations. Based on Hofstede's (2001) research on national cultures, differences can be identified, illustrated in Figure 1. It has been professionally proven (Hofstede, 2023) that national culture is reflected in the cultural characteristics of organisations so a comparison of the three countries covered by this research from an organisational perspective is justified.

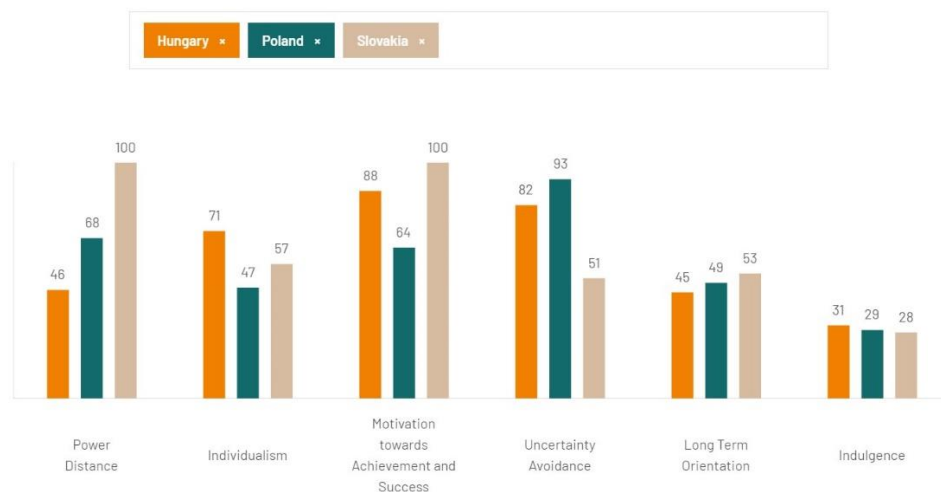


Figure 1. Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Source: own compilation

The differences in the characteristics of the cultures are shown in the figure, which anticipates possible differences based on the responses to the survey. The values are close for two parameters. On the Long Term Orientation, the countries studied show a pragmatic nature, with little planning for the future and thus rarely have a long-term strategy (Heidrich, 2017; Nagy & Kutasi, 2020). On the Indulgence dimension, all three nations score low, with cynicism and pessimism being the dominant characteristics. They place little emphasis on leisure and limit the satisfaction of their desires (Fóris et al., 2020).

### 2.1. The sample

Interview subjects were selected by random sampling. As a first step, we filtered out the partnerships from the Orbis database of European firms, and then, in proportion to the number of firms in each country, we selected every 250th item from Hungary, every 200th item from Slovakia, and every 300th item from Poland. Based on the results of the screening, SME managers (senior managers, HR managers) were contacted by phone and/or email. A total of 36 Hungarian (24 manufacturers and 12 service providers), 32 Polish (22 manufacturers and 10 service providers) and 30 Slovakian (19 manufacturers and 11 service providers) interviews were conducted with managers willing to be interviewed between September 2022 and December 2023. During the structured interview, open and semi-open questions were asked. The preparation of the respondents was facilitated by the short topic briefing and questions sent in advance, so there were no surprises. The interview questions fell into three main groups 1) vision, strategy, long-term planning 2) leadership style, sustainability leadership 3) shaping organisational culture (trust, teamwork, knowledge sharing). The questions focused on the practical application of the elements of Avery and Bergsteiner's (2011) pyramid model of sustainability leadership. The interviews lasted 50-70 minutes; the interviews were audio-recorded and transcripts of the audio recordings were made for later systematic analysis. The sample composition is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The test sample

SME	Hungarian 36		Polish 32		Slovak 30	
	manufactu- ring (24)	service (12)	manufactu- ring (22)	service (10)	manufactu- ring (19)	service (11)
number of employees						
• micro < 10	6	4	5	3	4	2
• small < 50	16	6	15	6	13	8
• medium < 250	2	2	2	1	2	1
Economic sector	construction, manufacturing industry, production company	hospitality transport, education, IT	construction, manufacturing industry, production company	hospitality transport, education, IT	construction, manufactu- ring industry, production company	hospitality transport, education, IT
	agriculture	human health, social care		human health, social care		health, social care
	trade	other services	trade	other services		

Source: own compilation

The qualitative analysis was carried out with the three main aspects in mind: reflecting the views of the interviewees, analysing the data and evaluating and interpreting the results. The results of the analysis according to the three aspects of analysis are presented in the next section.

### 3. Empirical results and discussion

The primary data were obtained from the structured management interviews. The analysis was carried out using Voyant Tools text analytics software, which is specifically designed to analyse this type of qualitative data. This software operates in a web-based text analysis, reading and visualisation environment. It provides the possibility to analyse texts in plain text, HTML, XML, PDF, RTF, MS Word, ODF, etc. It uses multiple tools to analyse the frequency and distribution of data/expressions within each document and/or multiple documents simultaneously. The interview texts were coded and categorised according to the focus of the research. The transcripts of the interviews were checked by multiple read-throughs and notes and reminders were added to the text (memos). The coding stage is suitable for breaking down the data into segments (based on the questions) to which labels were assigned to aid identification (Schwandt (2007)). The programme automatically performs the calculations (Correlations, Significance, Collocate, Correspondent Analysis, t-SN analysis, etc.) based on the coding and the parameters entered and displays the results in a visual format.

Voyant Tools has been previously used in a wide variety of professional fields, such as literature, language teaching, sociology, health, systems architecture, economics, etc. Among the possible statistical analysis methods, the following tools were used in this study: Document Terms, Word Clouds, WordTree, Context, StreamGraph, ScatterPlot (t-SNE analysis, Correspondence Analysis), Correlations and Significance.

The research questions, assumptions, question groups in the questionnaire and codes developed during the analysis are consistent. To test the first hypothesis, we looked for the practical application of the criteria formulated in the context of leadership style. To verify the second hypothesis, we sought to demonstrate the relationship between long-term planning, strategy development and vision formulation. The third hypothesis was tested by looking for



the validity of the qualifying characteristics of organisational culture, namely trust, teamwork and knowledge sharing. Table 3 shows the relationship between the above-mentioned aspects.

Table 3. Coding the interviews

Codes		The focus of interview questions	Assumption
Driving style	Leading	Appropriate driving style	Preference for democratic style and ethical values take a back seat.
Ethical leadership		Ethics and virtues	
Long-term goals	Planning, vision	Long-term thinking	Long-term thinking is valid, but only some of the organisations have a vision.
Vision		A strong shared vision and objective	
Culture	Culture	Appropriate culture	Team building is an important aspect, but there are problems with knowledge sharing due to a lack of trust.
Team building		Team orientation	
Knowledge retention		Knowledge sharing and retention	
Values		Trust	

**Sustainability leadership features**

Source: own compilation

**3.1. Results**

*Driving style*

To confirm our first hypothesis, we analysed the respondents' answers to the questions on their rating of leadership style and ethical behaviour. The word clouds drawn from the responses illustrate the pattern of the most common terms (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Word clouds of leadership styles

Source: own compilation

The figure shows that, as hypothesised, the democratic adjective is prominent in the case of the leaders of all three countries. In the Hungarian and Slovakian samples, the term 'team' appears, which reinforces the prevalence of democracy. Alongside this, but to a different extent, the adjective 'autocratic' is also present. In the Polish sample, the term 'situations' is more strongly represented, while in the Hungarian sample, it appears only vaguely. This suggests that managers choose the right behaviour depending on the situation. However, it may also show that autocratic behaviour is also present in the Polish, which they have tried to make more acceptable by using this term. The term 'responsibility' is emphasised only in the Polish sample, which demonstrates the presence of responsible behaviour and thinking.

When exploring the significant relationships, it is interesting to note that in the Hungarian sample, two relationships show a correlation with decisions (Figure 3). This demonstrates that even if less pronounced, both of them have a real weight in managerial

decisions. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the term 'autocratic' does not appear in the correlations of the Correspondent Analysis when analysing the three well-separated clusters (Figure 4). 'Decision', 'leadership style' and 'democratic' are grouped in the same cluster.

Term 1	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...
autocratic	decisions	0.74535596	0.013349064
consensus	decisions	0.74535596	0.013349064

Figure 3. Significant correlates of managerial decisions



Figure 4. Cluster analysis charts of the three nations' leadership styles

Source: own compilation

In the Polish sample, a significant relationship was found with the terms 'responsibility' and 'situations'. This is a strong correlation with the word cloud result. It suggests that responsibility and situational awareness are important for Polish managers. In the 3 clusters separated in the cluster analysis, the terms 'responsibility-decision-strategy', 'democratic-situation' and 'autocratic' are separated. These results confirm significant correlations (Figure 5). For Slovak respondents, significant correlations were also found for the terms 'decision', 'leadership' and 'democratic'. In terms of leadership style, both 'democratic' and 'autocratic' show a significant correlation, but only 'autocratic' shows a significant relationship with the decision. The three clusters of the cluster analysis are well separated, but the essential characteristics of leadership style (leadership, autocratic, democratic, situation, team, flexibility) are grouped in a single unit. This confirms the correlation (Figure 6).

Correlations					Correlations						
Term 1	←	-	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...	Term 1	←	-	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...
allow			situations	0.7170016	0.019610265	activities			responsibil...	0.8728716	0.0009774...
autonomy			situations	0.7170016	0.019610265	allows			responsibil...	0.8728716	0.0009774...
belongs			situations	0.7170016	0.019610265	areas			responsibil...	0.8728716	0.0009774...
decide			situations	0.7170016	0.019610265	autonomy			responsibil...	0.8728716	0.0009774...
difficulties			situations	0.7170016	0.019610265	difficulties			responsibil...	0.8728716	0.0009774...

Figure 5. Significant relationships between characteristic expressions of Polish leadership style

Source: own compilation

By their admission, the leaders are primarily democratic in style. The reality is that the opposite behaviour also occurs, but only when the situation calls for it, according to the leaders. While it is commendable that democratic behaviour prevails, we did not encounter any reflection on the expectations of sustainability leadership during the interviews.

Correlations					Correlations						
Term 1	←	-	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...	Term 1	←	-	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...
democratic			leadership	0.8348471	0.002653084	autocratic			democratic	0.8212615	0.0035770...
autocratic			leadership	0.7479576	0.012855952	decisions			democratic	0.72445	0.017801944
decisions			leadership	0.7334869	0.015767453	business			democratic	0.6621222	0.036997795
characteris...			leadership	0.7035265	0.02319784	autocratic			decisions	0.7146459	0.020207655
business			leadership	0.6784005	0.031047495						

Figure 6. Significant relationships between characteristic expressions of Slovak leadership style  
*Source: own compilation*

This result is consistent with the Hofstede 'Power distance' dimension, where Hungarians have the lowest power distance, and the 'Indulgence' dimension, where the highest level of attention and care is related to co-workers. Ethics is the defining characteristic of leadership. To evaluate the responses to the related questions, we examined the fragments of sentences that appear in the context of the term, which are shown in Figures 7, 8 and 9 below.

Left	Term	Right
part of the everyday culture	ethics	is very important and I
from that. The code of	ethics	is in the public consciousness
directly, quickly, one-to-one	ethics	and fair treatment are important
company's principles. A code of	ethics	is part of every contract
this. We strive for basic	ethics	It is not all about
There is a code of	ethics	in the company, but they
they are such written templates.	ethics	are a basic requirement for
don't have a code of	ethics	. We don't have a code
don't have a code of	ethics	, but we do require that
not have a code of	ethics	, but ethical behaviour is a
There is no code of	ethics	, fortunately ethical behaviour has not

Figure 7. Context of the term ethics (Hungarian) (Slovak)

Left	Term	Right
communication is not always achieved	ethical	behaviour is expected for any
the standard without a code	ethical	behaviour is fundamental and the
For the leader, respect and	ethical	behaviour is very important, especially
work well and honestly. Respect,	ethical	behaviour and trust are very
manager attaches great importance to	ethical	behaviour in the workplace, and
her colleagues. In his opinion,	ethical	behaviour towards each other saves

Figure 8 Context of the term ethics

Left	Term	Right
Ethical behaviour important work. code	ethics	applicable employees. set high requirements
employees. set high requirements professional	ethics	take care resolve ethical issues
ethical issues honest responsible manner	ethics	principles important everyone company because
depends situation, try mislead customers.	ethics	important, especially working people, translates
less cause complaint, communicate clearly	ethics	bullshit edit lie customers, Employees
trust give company. every activity	ethics	necessary work well work exist

Figure 9. Context of the term ethics (Polish)  
*Source: own compilation*

Terms used in the context of ethical leadership: bribery, fraud, online training, clear and honest communication, code of ethics and trust. There are several perceived shortcomings in this area. Several organisations have a code of ethics, but its importance and visibility are not yet part of everyday life. It has been stressed on several occasions that it is natural to respect ethical principles, but in most places, the perception of the situation depends on the value judgement of the people involved. Until a critical situation exists or is generated, it is not a task in daily practice. In the Hungarian sample, it can be seen that in many cases the response indicated that there was no code of ethics or other written policy, but when asked, it was considered important. The Poles and Slovaks did not talk at all about any regulated behaviour or expectations about ethics, but when asked they too considered it important. The results in this case confirm our hypothesis. Respondents did not mention ethical terms at all in the context of rating their own behaviour and management style. Written regulations and codes of ethics

are rare. Thus, based on the above analyses, the first hypothesis is considered to be confirmed. A democratic style is typical according to the respondents of all 3 nations, but cultural differences are revealed by a more detailed analysis. Ethical issues did not emerge in the leaders' ratings, they were only considered important for specific issues.

**Planning, vision**

To prove the second hypothesis, the planning and visioning exercise will be assessed. The tree diagrams of the most frequent terms and the significant relationships are shown in Figure 10. Hungarian respondents represent long-term thinking, but the possibility of setting goals and focusing on the short term was also mentioned. Polish managers mentioned planning mainly about the future and responsibility and its management. The other terms do not add significantly to the assumption. For the Slovak sample, strategy, long-term planning, goals and, surprisingly, vision were also mentioned in the context of planning, a result consistent with Hofstede's 'Long Term Orientation' dimension, where Slovak behaviour scores highest. No significant relationships were found with the term planning, with the term 'term' showing a closer relationship with both short and long and 'plan'. When looking at the word combinations, the terms used together (analysing 1000 cases), and the relationships in the tree diagrams are confirmed. The most frequent pairs of terms (first 10) are shown in Figure 11.

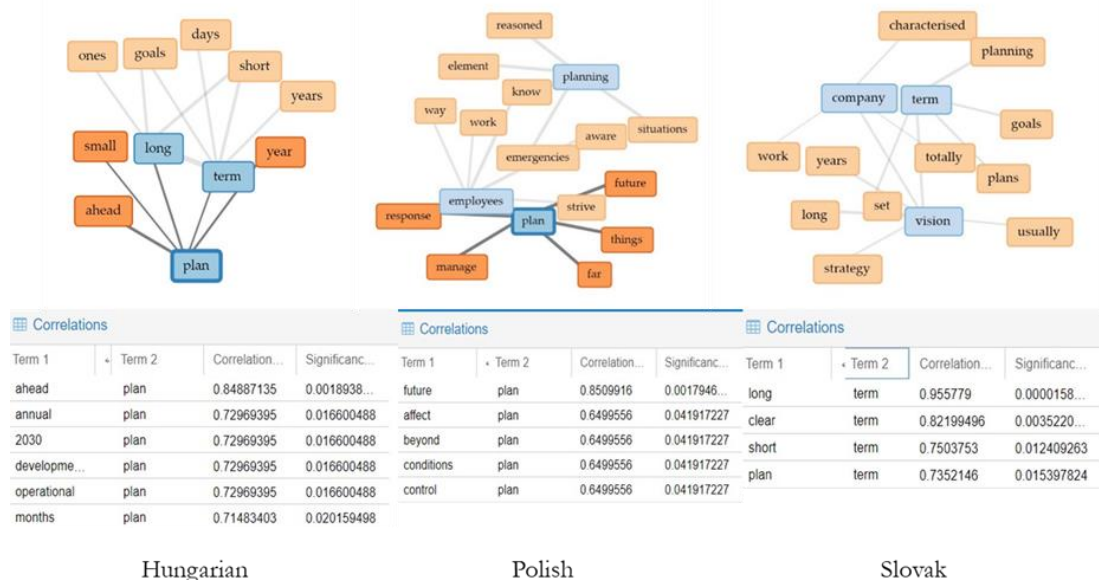


Figure 10. Word associations and significant correlations of long-term planning by country  
Source: own compilation

Collocates (Hungarian)			Collocates (Polish)			Collocates (Slovak)		
Term	Collocate	Count (context)	Term	Collocate	Count (context)	Term	Collocate	Count (context)
plan	plan	34	planning	planning	64	long	term	20
long	term	23	employees	company	35	term	vision	19
term	plan	17	company	employees	35	term	term	16
plan	year	16	planning	response	31	vision	term	16
plan	term	16	planning	plan	31	vision	long	16
plan	long	16	plan	planning	31	long	vision	16
long	plan	16	employees	vision	31	term	goals	14
goals	goals	16	vision	employees	31	vision	vision	14
year	plan	16	employees	employees	30	term	years	12
plan	ahead	15	planning	current	29	term	planning	12

Figure 11. Typical long-term planning buckets by country  
Source: own compilation

'Vision' occurs 4 times in the first 10 pairs of terms in the Slovak sample, 2 times in the Polish answers and not in the Hungarian answers. Later in the list, it appears 6 times with 'company' and 'term', and 5 times with 'long'.

The flowcharts of the three nations' responses are illustrated in Figures 12, 13, 14. In the figures, the term vision is illustrated in pink (Hungarian), pink (Polish) and green (Slovak). It can be seen that only some of the respondents mentioned the term 'vision'. The longer green colour is shown for Slovaks, indicating the frequency of occurrence in their responses. In the Hungarian and Polish responses, the pink colour appears only partially in the figures. The difference in the expression in the answers is also reflected in the colour run and the width of the areas, which reflects cultural differences. Although the difference is not significant, the results confirm, as above, that Slovaks have the highest Long Term Orientation score. Hofstede (2023).

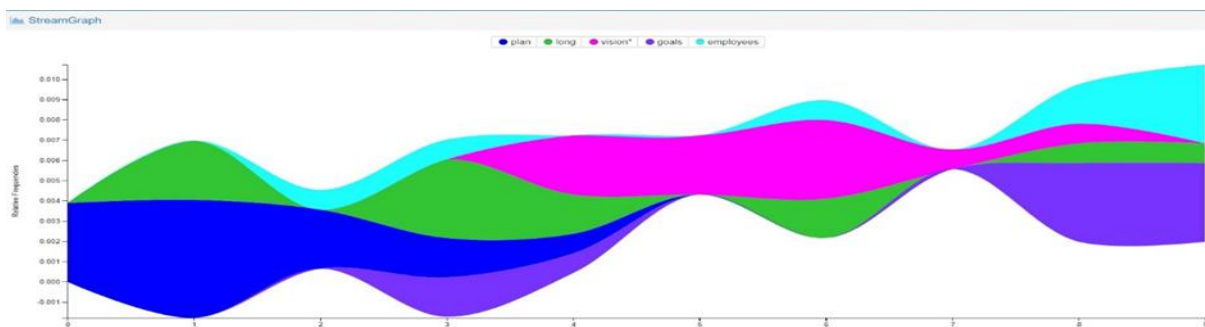


Figure 12. Trend chart of Hungarian responses

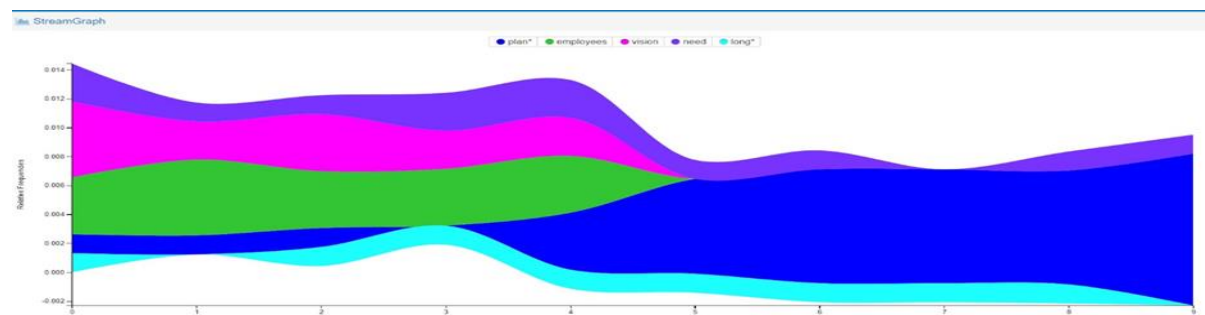


Figure 13. Trend chart of Polish responses

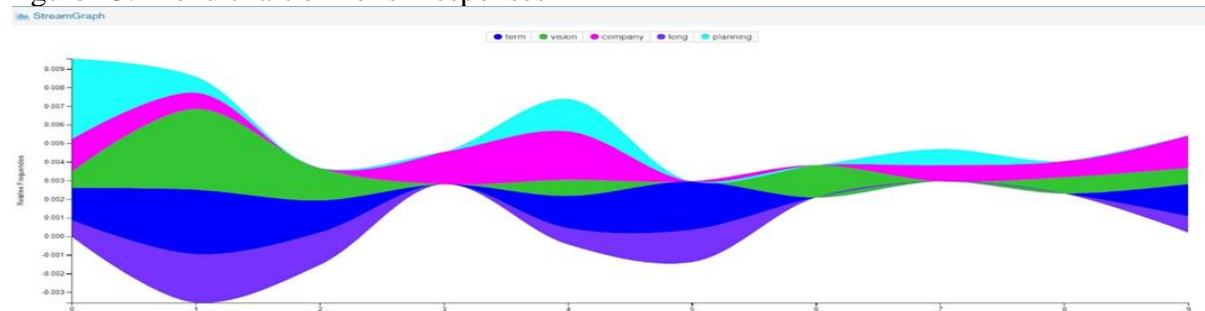


Figure 14. Trend chart of Slovak responses

Source: own compilation

The significant relationships of the correlation coefficients with vision are shown in Figure 15. The relationships and their values support the idea that vision takes a back seat in the thinking of the responding managers. For Hungarian respondents, we obtained a significant relationship with only one term, which supports our hypothesis. The Polish managers' responses

show the strongest correlation with the term 'difficult'. For Slovaks, the important relationships show significant correlations with the terms 'involve', 'organisation', 'clear' and 'long'.

Correlations				Correlations				Correlations			
Term 1	+ Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...	Term 1	+ Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...	Term 1	+ Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...
colleagues	vision*	0.7824759	0.00746281	difficult	vision	0.9385408	0.0000579...	forward	vision	0.8699262	0.0010672...
				employees	vision	0.87690264	0.0008636...	involve	vision	0.8699262	0.0010672...
				company	vision	0.86968184	0.0010750...	looking	vision	0.8699262	0.0010672...
				quickly	vision	0.8350728	0.002639371	organisatio...	vision	0.8699262	0.0010672...
				capabilities	vision	0.8350728	0.002639371	clear	vision	0.6834536	0.029342053
				care	vision	0.8350728	0.002639371	long	vision	0.63481104	0.048630863
				changes	vision	0.8350728	0.002639371				

Hungarian

Polish

Slovak

Figure 15 Significant vocabulary related to vision by country

Source: own compilation

The results presented in the figures above show that the term 'vision' is more prominent only among Slovak respondents, and is less prominent in the other cases. Thus, the second hypothesis can be confirmed and the Long Term Orientation in the Hofstede culture parameters is also confirmed.

### Culture

Cultural conditions are among the most important characteristics that support or hinder the sustainability criteria. Building on the literature, three of the many parameters are considered. These are 'teamwork', 'trust' and 'knowledge sharing'.

The word clouds created from what was said already anticipate the most commonly used terms. The term 'trust' was almost equally weighted in the responses. For knowledge-related word combinations, 'knowledge sharing' was most prominent in Polish responses and least prominent in Slovak responses. 'Team' and 'teamwork' were slightly less pronounced, but more frequent in all nations. Further analysis revealed that the terms 'little exists' or 'lacking' or 'needs improvement' also appeared frequently about trust (Figure 16).



Hungarian

Polish

Slovak

Figure 16. Word clouds of cultural characteristics by nation

Source: own compilation

The results of the Correspondent Analysis allowed for the development of three factors (Figure 17). In the case of the Hungarian sample, the three factors: knowledge sharing (blue), trust (green) and teamwork (pink) clearly illustrate the above. In the Polish sample, the resulting three factors have a different content composition. In this case, trust and knowledge sharing are clustered together (pink), indicating the closeness of their relationship. Team-related characteristics form the second cluster (green) and other characteristics of culture the third (blue). For the Slovak respondents, two clusters were possible. In the first, knowledge sharing

and behaviour appear (blue) with a not very strong emphasis, while in the second, trust and teamwork are closely related to other characteristics (leadership, commitment, atmosphere) (green).

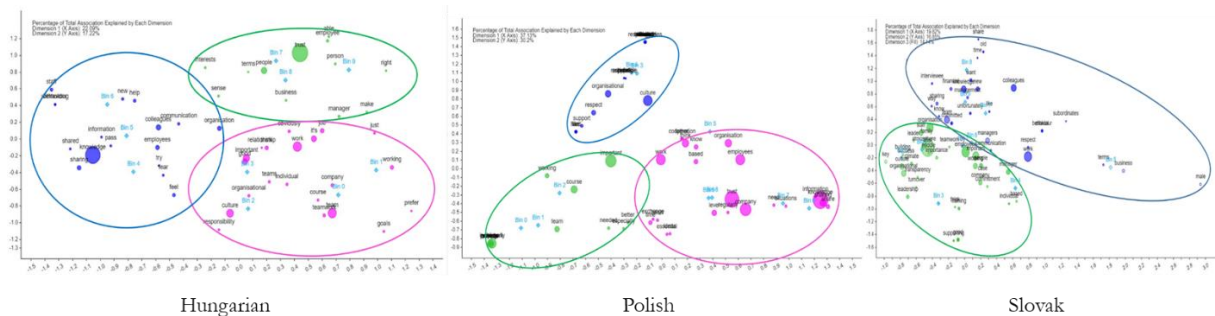


Figure 17. Cluster diagrams of culture characteristics by country  
*Source: own compilation*

The above results illustrate that, while the perception of the supporting role of trust differs between nations, it plays a prominent role in all cases (for Hungarians it is a requirement in its own right, for Poles it is most needed for knowledge sharing, while Slovaks feel it is essential for teamwork.) These results confirm the presence of 'Individualism' in the context of the Hofstede dimension, which is the highest for Hungarians.

**Trust**

If we look at the importance of trust, we see the following significant correlations (Figure 18). For all nations, 'trust' shows a relationship with several terms. The least significant correlations were found in the Hungarian responses (this is consistent with the results of the cluster analysis). In the Polish and Slovak samples, significant correlations were obtained with higher frequency. Interestingly, the term 'difficult' also appeared in the Slovakian responses.

Correlations				Correlations				Correlations			
Term 1	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...	Term 1	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...	Term 1	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...
person	trust	0.7255893	0.017535951	regularly	trust	0.9517086	0.0000224...	building	trust	0.96851	0.0000052...
essential	trust	0.71497315	0.020123921	building	trust	0.9517086	0.0000224...	mutual	trust	0.9399559	0.0000528...
employee	trust	0.70722914	0.02217046	check	trust	0.9517086	0.0000224...	traditional	trust	0.9399559	0.0000528...
				duties	trust	0.9517086	0.0000224...	atmosphere	trust	0.810283	0.004476581
				easily	trust	0.9517086	0.0000224...	contribute	trust	0.78956294	0.006597295
				expect	trust	0.9517086	0.0000224...	prevails	trust	0.78956294	0.006597295
				fact	trust	0.9517086	0.0000224...	leader	trust	0.78220433	0.007497492
								difficult	trust	0.7331656	0.015836857

Figure 18. Significant relationships of the expression of trust by country  
*Source: own compilation*

**Knowledge sharing/retention**

'Knowledge sharing' was the most frequently mentioned by all respondents, but 'knowledge retention/withholding' was also mentioned in the Hungarian and Slovak samples.

The word clouds of terms and the frequency of occurrence (Collocate) of term pairs are shown in Figure 19. In the Hungarian sample, 'knowledge', 'sharing' and 'withholding' are the terms with the highest frequency. In line with the environmental embeddedness, they indicate the mindset of Hungarian managers. In the Polish responses, the term 'knowledge sharing' is prominent, with 'information', 'company' and 'employees' appearing in the background. The analysis of Slovak responses shows that knowledge sharing is mainly associated with the

existence or absence of trust. The possibility of knowledge retention was not raised. According to pairs of the term Collocate, 'knowledge sharing' is indeed the most frequent mention in Hungarian, followed immediately by 'withholding'. This suggests that knowledge sharing is not unhindered. For the other two nations, Collocate confirms the information in the word clouds.

The cluster analysis of the Hungarian responses shows that 'knowledge sharing', 'culture', 'teams', and 'colleagues' belong to the same cluster, while 'withholding' is associated with 'task', 'information', 'behaviour', 'staff', 'communication' (Figure 20). The co-movement within clusters illustrates the relationship between the terms. In the case of Polish, two distinct clusters can be formed. The individual elements demonstrate the co-movements. The overshadowing of information sharing is confirmed by the clusters being in separate groups. In this case, the possibility of knowledge retention was not raised by respondents. The Slovakian cluster analysis confirms that 'knowledge sharing' and 'trust', as well as the accompanying terms such as 'colleagues', 'willing', 'positive', 'manager', etc. are closely related. All relevant terms related to knowledge sharing are grouped in one of the two clusters. In the interviews, it was mentioned that everyone considers it important, but that a lack of trust makes it difficult to put into practice.



Figure 19. Word cloud and word pair frequencies of Knowledge Sharing terms by country



Figure 20. Clusters of knowledge sharing by country  
Source: own compilation

Summarising the characteristics of knowledge sharing/retention, we can say that all three nations understand and feel the need for it, they are trying to do it, there are management measures and organisational initiatives that refer to it, but the trust that is the basis of knowledge sharing needs to be further built and strengthened in all cases.



**Teamwork**

The need for teamwork is indisputable. However, looking at cultural characteristics (Hofstede, 2023), it can be seen that Hungarians have a strong preference for individualistic behaviour, while Poles and especially Slovaks show a greater willingness to work together. The results of the analysis confirm these characteristics. For the Hungarian respondents, only two significant relationships were found with the term team (Figure 21), while the term teamwork showed no significant relationship.

As a result of the t-SN analysis, 3 clusters can be distinguished. 'Team' is emphasised but is placed in a separate cluster. 'Trust' and 'inevitable' are emphasised close to each other and are placed in a cluster with 'teamwork'. Cluster 3 includes 'goal', 'individual' and emotions. It can be seen that, although the existence of teams is considered important, teamwork is treated with trust, showing gaps. At the same time, the term 'goals' tends to be associated with 'individual'. The order of relationships in the word tree supports their thinking, where 'teamwork' is associated with 'necessary', 'individual' and 'develop'.

Correlations			
Term 1	Term 2	Correlation...	Significanc...
believe	team	0.84270096	0.002205254
develop	team	0.6956411	0.025494011

Figure 21. Significant relationships of the term team in the Hungarian sample

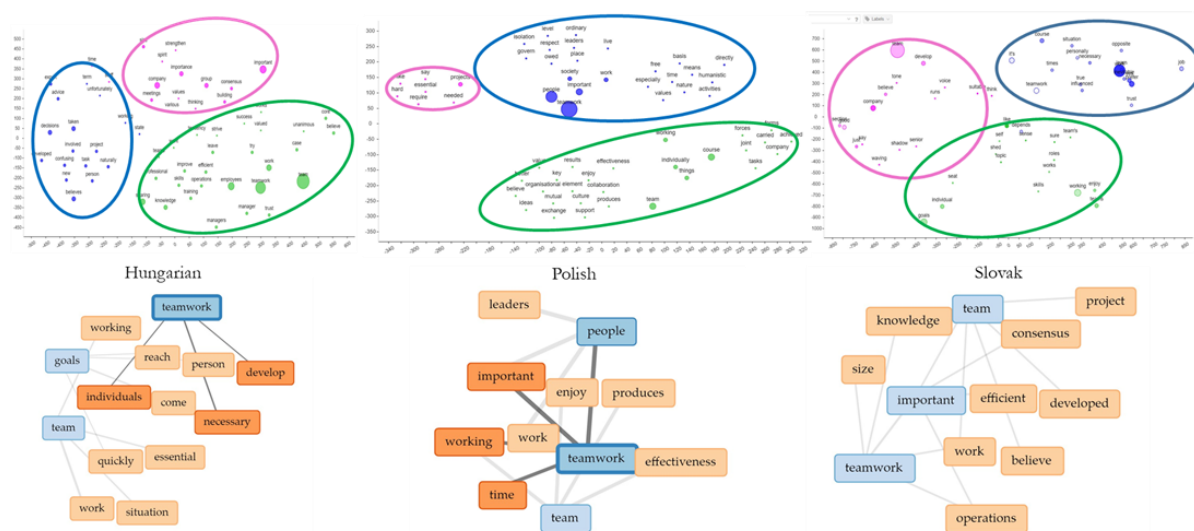


Figure 22. Teamwork vocabulary and cluster diagrams by country  
Source: own compilation

In the Polish sample, the terms 'teamwork', 'people' and 'important' were clustered close together, emphatically in the same cluster. Here too, the term 'team' stands apart, clustered together with terms such as 'culture', 'key' and 'effectiveness'. The third cluster includes some terms related to 'teamwork' such as 'project', 'hard' and 'essential'. Here again, the vocabulary supports the cluster analysis.

The Slovak sample also confirms the cultural characteristics. In this case, the terms 'team', 'teamwork', 'trust' are clustered with 'knowledge sharing', 'professional' and 'effective'. Cluster 2 includes reinforcing terms such as 'important', 'consensus', 'group' and 'thinking'. The third cluster contains additional terms such as 'project', 'person' and 'involved'. The order of the word tree's relationships also gave a confirmatory result in this case.

### **3.2. Discussion**

The research aims to assess the characteristics of sustainability leadership in three countries. One of our hypotheses is that the expectations of sustainability leadership are poorly understood and that the respondents focus on the characteristics of a traditional democratic leadership style, while the importance of ethical leadership is neglected. The results of the statistical analysis confirmed our hypothesis. The results are in line with Hofstede's 'Power Distance' and 'Indulgence' dimensions, as Hungarians have the lowest power distance and the highest attention to co-workers. Previous research has found similar results, identifying several styles linked to individual characteristics in addition to the classic styles (Blahová et al., 2023; Jain & Prekumar, 2010; Robbins, 2023; Knezevic, 2023). In their study, Visser and Courtice (2011) based their expectations on the Cambridge University model, summarised in 7 points, which are in line with the elements examined in our research and thus support our findings. Our second hypothesis, that the characteristics of long-term thinking are incompletely represented and lack vision among SME managers, was confirmed by the analyses. When they do make plans, they mainly include a short-term vision and vaguely a long-term vision, but the term 'vision' was only mentioned a few times as a result of the questions, except in the case of the Slovak respondents. The long-term orientation as one of the Hofstede culture dimensions (Hofstede, 2023) is confirmed in these results. Slovak leaders are closest to adopting long-term thinking, while Hungarians are the least. These results are supported by significant relationships. Results from previous research suggest that long-term planning, which includes the existence of a vision, is a necessary condition for the practice of sustainability leadership (Avery, 2005; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). The plausibility of this assumption is supported by a study by Suriyankietkaew and colleagues (2022), in which they investigated the existence of long-term managerial thinking and expected competences in the SME sector. Our results provide a basis for similar conclusions. The third hypothesis was tested to identify the organizational culture and its characteristics. As we have read in the literature, sustainability leadership requires a cultural context where trust prevails (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Kuráth et al., 2023), knowledge-sharing works (Iqbal et al., 2020) and teamwork is a typical working style (Johnson, 2021). By examining these organisational characteristics, we can conclude that leaders in the nations studied consider it important to build and maintain trust in the organisation. However, their perceptions and thinking differ somewhat. Hungarians see it as a separate requirement, Poles see it as most necessary for knowledge sharing, while Slovaks associate it with teamwork. Summarising the expectations of trust, leaders stressed its importance, but all nations consider it to be incomplete and difficult to achieve. The other expected cultural characteristic is the phenomenon of knowledge sharing/retention (Iqbal et al., 2020; Bulmer, 2021). Knowledge sharing was mentioned several times for all three nations, but knowledge retention was also mentioned for Slovaks and Hungarians. The leaders of all three nations understand and feel the importance of knowledge sharing and are trying to implement it, but as the results on trust confirm, the lack of trusting relationships that underpin knowledge sharing is a barrier. Thus, in all cases, this area needs further building and strengthening. Teamwork is perhaps the most frequently cited cultural expectation in the literature. Related analytical results also contribute to validating our hypothesis. According to Hofstede's dimensions, the traits of 'Individualism' show the prevalence of this expectation. Hungarians are undoubtedly at the bottom of the list in this requirement (Hofstede's 'Individualism' is the highest in their case) and Slovaks have the highest number of positive opinions (Hofstede's dimension is the lowest). The unconditional functioning of teamwork was not confirmed by any of the nations, and cultural differences were also confirmed here. To sum up, the research results suggest that there is still much to be done to meet the basic requirements of sustainability

leadership for SME managers. Laker (2022) is clear in Forbes Magazine, citing a Finnish example. In his view, the way to move away from traditional governance models towards a participatory approach is to involve all stakeholders in the search for sustainable solutions. The paucity of research to date and the lack of practical cases confirms that this style of leadership is not well known and that the expected characteristics are even less popular. That said, there is nothing new under the sun, the basic expectations are not new needs. It should be stressed that the characteristics we are examining are only the basics, there are many more requirements (see theoretical models) to be met to talk about truly sustainable management. Managers must become more familiar with the essence and importance of this management style. They should make an effort to consciously initiate as soon as possible the change that will create the cultural basis for sustainable leadership actions, behaviours and thinking. Knowledge of the requirements of sustainability management and the acquisition of the necessary competences are necessary to ensure that the sustainable operation of organisations delivers real business results. The core elements at the lowest level of Avery and Bergsteiner's (2011) pyramid model set out expectations that build on the leadership competencies expected regardless of the concept of sustainability. In practice, it is also worth considering the elements at the next steps of the pyramid in order to ensure long-term market success. Higher level practices in the pyramid will have a strong set of expected leadership competences that can implement sustainability principles. This is not only in the interest of the organisations, but also in the individual and collective interest of the managers. It is recommended that managers understand and review the expectations and, if necessary, review their own practices and make the necessary decisions about further training.

#### 4. Conclusion

The research focused on a topic that is still not very popular today, namely the characteristics of sustainability leadership. Although sustainability is one of the most common terms used in the context of how organisations operate, the leadership behaviours, values and decisions required to achieve it are not yet a focus of research. Therefore, this research is a novel contribution, providing a comprehensive picture of the situation today based on interviews with SME managers from three nations. For the basic criteria of sustainability leadership to be put into practice, the *cultural conditions* need to be created first and foremost. The first step is to *build trust*, which is essential to achieve a high level of *knowledge sharing and teamwork*. It also requires a change in the mindset of leaders, who can make *ethical decisions* to ensure that *long-term vision* is put into practice. There is a need to *train SME managers*, irrespective of nationality, as shortcomings can be overcome in all cases. The ideas highlighted above in italics summarise the key message of the study and the management actions to be taken.

##### *Limitations of the research*

The main limitation of the research is the sample. We tried to follow the requirements of representativeness, but the willingness of managers to respond worked against this. A limitation is the toolbox offered by the method of analysis used. Although visualisation has a wide range of potential, the underlying statistical programmes are not very user-friendly.

##### *Further possibilities for research*

Despite the limitations, a comprehensive picture of the research issues examined has been sketched, which, when extended to other nations, has the potential to provide an even broader overview of one of the most critical and pressing demands of management. We have

also initiated quantitative research to confirm our results. Following a similar logic, we intend to map the practices of SME managers in the countries surveyed by asking questions for each element of the sustainability pyramid. In this way, we aim to confirm the findings of the qualitative research.

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