SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN A MUNICIPAL CULTURAL INSTITUTE: APPLYING THE HONEYBEE LEADERSHIP MODEL IN AN URBAN EDUCATIONAL TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract

Purpose – Although the Honeybee Leadership Model (HBLM) has been widely applied in corporate environments, its applicability to hybrid public-mission organizations remains largely unexplored. This study examines whether the HBLM provides an appropriate analytical framework for sustainable leadership in a cultural institution operating across education, culture and urban tourism.
Design/Methodology/Approach – The study adopts a qualitative single-case study design focusing on Muzeiko Children's Science Center in Sofia (Muzeiko). Data were collected through 29 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, documentary analysis and organizational records. Deductive thematic analysis used the 23 elements of the HBLM as predefined analytical categories.
Findings – Evidence was identified across all four levels of the HBLM, with varying support across practices. Foundation practices related to mission continuity, stakeholder orientation and staff development were most strongly supported, while higher-level practices such as self-management and knowledge sharing emerged mainly from interviews. The findings demonstrate that sustainable leadership contributed to organizational resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic and institutional transformation.
Originality of the research – The study extends sustainable leadership research by demonstrating that the HBLM is applicable beyond corporate settings to hybrid public-mission organizations. It further suggests that sustainable leadership outcomes should be interpreted not only through financial performance but also through public value, educational impact, stakeholder legitimacy and organizational resilience.
Keywords sustainable leadership; Honeybee Leadership Model; cultural institutions; strategic management

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become one of the defining challenges for contemporary organizations operating in increasingly dynamic, uncertain and resource-constrained environments. While sustainability focused primarily on environmental protection and corporate social responsibility, recent research recognizes sustainability as a broader strategic capability that integrates economic viability, social responsibility, ethical governance and long-term organizational resilience (Elkington, 1997; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018; Iqbal et al., 2021). Within this perspective, leadership shapes organizational culture, develops human capital, fosters innovation and maintaining stakeholder trust, enabling organizations to adapt to continuous change (Tideman et al., 2013; Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic, rapid technological change, increasing stakeholder expectations and growing institutional uncertainty have demonstrated that long-term success depends not only on financial performance but also on adaptive capacity, collaborative governance and resilience (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Bansal et al., 2021). Organizational resilience is increasingly understood as the capability to anticipate, respond to and recover from disruption while preserving core identity and strategic direction (Linnenluecke, 2017; Duchek, 2020). Sustainable leadership enables to balance continuity with adaptation while creating long-term value for multiple stakeholder groups. Among the conceptual approaches to sustainable leadership, the HBLM, developed by Avery and Bergsteiner (2010, 2011) provides comprehensive frameworks for examining leadership as a system of mutually reinforcing organizational practices. Empirical studies have demonstrated positive relationships between sustainable leadership practices and organizational performance, employee engagement, innovation and resilience (Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018). Nevertheless, most empirical applications of the HBLM remain concentrated in private-sector organizations, leaving its applicability in hybrid public organizations largely unexplored.

This research gap is particularly relevant for hybrid organizations that combine multiple institutional logics and simultaneously pursue social, educational and economic objectives. Hybrid organizations operate under conditions that require balancing public value creation, stakeholder accountability and financial sustainability (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Doherty et al., 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014). Recent research suggests that these organizations face distinctive governance challenges arising from the coexistence of social missions and commercial activities, requiring leadership approaches capable of integrating diverse stakeholder interests while preserving identity (Smith & Besharov, 2019; Mair et al., 2015). Cultural and educational institutions constitute an increasingly important category of hybrid organizations. Museums, science centers and cultural institutes have evolved beyond their traditional educational functions to become active participants in urban development, community engagement, informal learning and experience-based tourism (Falk & Dierking, 2018; Richards, 2021).

At the same time, these organizations are expected to diversify funding sources, strengthen public engagement, develop innovative learning experiences and demonstrate measurable social impact. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of cultural institutions, requiring rapid adaptation while maintaining public relevance (ICOM, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Radermecker, 2021; NEMO, 2021). Despite their growing strategic importance, leadership in such institutions has received comparatively limited attention within sustainable leadership research.

Against this background, the study examines sustainable leadership in Muzeiko, a municipal cultural institute. The organization offers a valuable empirical setting because it has successfully navigated two major challenges: the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its institutional transformation into a municipal cultural institute in 2022.

The study evaluates the applicability of the HBLM in a municipal cultural institution and to examines its contribution to organizational resilience, mission continuity and long-term organizational development. To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

> **RQ1.** To what extent is the HBLM applicable to a hybrid public-mission cultural institution?
> **RQ2.** Which of the 23 HBLM elements are reflected in the governance practices, organizational culture and leadership processes of Muzeiko?
> **RQ3.** How do sustainable leadership practices contribute to organizational resilience, stakeholder engagement and long-term organizational performance following institutional transformation and external disruption?

The study contributes to the literature as it extends the empirical application of the HBLM beyond its traditional corporate context by linking sustainable leadership with hybrid cultural institutions, experiential learning and organizational resilience. It also provides empirical evidence from a municipal culture institute broadening understanding of sustainable leadership in a hybrid public -mission organizations.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 presents the qualitative case study methodology, including the research design, case selection, data collection procedures, analytical approach and measures adopted to ensure the credibility of the findings. Section 4 reports the empirical findings, organized according to the four levels of the HBLM, and presents the evidence derived from interviews, documentary sources and organizational data. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to existing literature, interprets their theoretical significance, examines their implications for sustainable leadership in hybrid public-mission organizations, and outlines the study's practical implications. Section 6 concludes the paper by summarizing the principal findings and contributions, acknowledging the study's limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Sustainable leadership as a theoretical perspective

Sustainable leadership has developed as a response to the limitations of short-term, shareholder-centered and efficiency-driven management approaches. Rather than treating sustainability as a peripheral environmental or corporate social responsibility activity, sustainable leadership conceptualizes sustainability as a core leadership orientation embedded in organizational culture, decision-making, people development, stakeholder relations and long-term performance (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Tideman et al., 2013; Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018). In this perspective, leadership is not limited to the behavior of individual managers, but is expressed through organizational practices that enable long-term viability and value creation for multiple stakeholders. The sustainable leadership literature increasingly emphasizes the connection between leadership, organizational learning and resilience. Organizations operating in uncertain environments require leadership practices that strengthen adaptive capacity, employee commitment, trust, innovation and stakeholder collaboration (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016). This is particularly important in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which demonstrated that organizational survival depends not only on financial resources, but also on mission continuity, internal cohesion, stakeholder legitimacy and the ability to adapt programs and services under changing conditions (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Bansal et al., 2021).

Recent research also shows that sustainable leadership contributes to organizational performance through both tangible and intangible mechanisms. Studies have linked sustainable leadership with financial performance, employee satisfaction, stakeholder satisfaction, organizational commitment, innovation and resilience (Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016; Iqbal et al., 2021). These findings suggest that sustainable leadership should be understood as a systemic capability rather than a narrow managerial style. It supports organizational continuity by aligning values, practices and performance outcomes over time. But despite the growing body of research, sustainable leadership studies remain concentrated mainly in business organizations. Less attention has been paid to public, hybrid, educational and cultural institutions, even though such organizations increasingly face similar challenges of adaptation, stakeholder accountability, funding diversification and long-term resilience. This limitation is significant because sustainable leadership may operate differently in organizations whose core purpose is not profit maximization, but public value creation, learning, cultural participation and community engagement.

1.2 The Honeybee Leadership Model: dimensions, logic and contribution

The HBLM, developed by Avery and Bergsteiner, is one of the most established frameworks in sustainable leadership research. The model contrasts two broad leadership paradigms: the "honeybee" approach and the "locust" approach. The honeybee approach is associated with long-term value creation, stakeholder orientation, ethical behavior, employee development, organizational learning and resilience. By contrast, the locust approach represents short-term, shareholder-first management that may produce immediate financial results but undermines long-term sustainability (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2010; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). The model is built around 23 interrelated leadership practices. These practices are organized in a pyramid logic. The first level consists of foundation practices, including continuous staff development, amicable labor relations, staff retention, succession planning, valuing people, ethical behavior, long-term perspective, social responsibility, environmental responsibility, stakeholder orientation and considered organizational change. These practices create the basic conditions for sustainable organizational behavior. The second level consists of higher-level practices that become possible when the foundation practices are present. These include consensual decision-making, self-management, team orientation, enabling culture, knowledge sharing and trust. These practices reflect the internal social architecture of sustainable organizations, where employees are empowered, knowledge circulates across organizational boundaries and collaboration replaces rigid hierarchical control. The third level includes key performance drivers such as innovation, staff engagement and quality. These drivers link leadership practices with performance outcomes. At the top of the model are long-term outcomes such as strong reputation, customer and stakeholder satisfaction, financial performance, long-term shareholder or public value, and organizational resilience (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). The logic of the model is therefore systemic: sustainable outcomes do not result from isolated leadership actions, but from the interaction of mutually reinforcing organizational practices.

The HBLM is an analytical framework that allows leadership practices to be examined across multiple organizational dimensions rather than through a single leadership style. It links leadership practices with long-term performance and resilience, which is particularly relevant for organizations facing disruption and institutional transformation. It also includes both social and economic dimensions, making it suitable for analyzing hybrid organizations that combine public mission with revenue-generating activities. At the same time, the model has limitations. Much of the empirical research applying the HBLM has focused on business organizations, especially private companies and SMEs. Although the model claims broad relevance, its application in public, cultural and educational organizations remains comparatively limited. Another limitation is that the model contains many elements, which may make empirical operationalization complex. Researchers therefore need to explain clearly how the model is applied, how evidence is interpreted and how the different elements are connected to organizational outcomes. These limitations justify the study, which applies the HBLM in a municipal cultural institution and examines whether the model can explain sustainable leadership practices in a hybrid public-mission context.

1.3 Previous applications of the HBLM

Previous studies using the HBLM show that the model has been applied in different organizational and national contexts, although primarily within business settings. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) developed the model as an alternative to short-term shareholder-first leadership, arguing that sustainable leadership practices strengthen long-term organizational performance and resilience. In a later contribution, Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) further linked the 23 practices with business resilience and performance, emphasizing that sustainable leadership depends on integrated practices rather than isolated managerial initiatives. Several empirical studies have applied the model in Asian organizational contexts. Kantabutra and Avery (2013) examined HBLM practices in a leading Asian industrial conglomerate and showed that long-term orientation, stakeholder responsibility and people-centered practices can be present even in large publicly listed corporations. Kantabutra and Avery (2013) applied the model to Thailand's oldest university, demonstrating that many Honeybee practices can also be found in a public service and educational organization. This study shows the potential of the model beyond purely corporate settings. Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2016) later demonstrated links between sustainable leadership practices and financial performance in Thai SMEs, indicating that the HBLM can explain both social and economic outcomes. Recent research by Bencsik and Pangsy-Kania (2023) applied the logic of the Honeybee Pyramid to compare sustainable leadership practices among Hungarian and Polish SMEs. Their findings confirmed the continued relevance of the HBLM as a framework for analyzing leadership mindsets and sustainability practices, while also demonstrating that the implementation of sustainable leadership practices varies across organizational and national contexts. The literature shows that the HBLM has been applied in several empirical contexts, including industrial corporations, banks, SMEs and universities. However, cultural institutions, science centers and municipal organizations remain underrepresented. This gap is important because such organizations operate with different accountability structures, funding models and performance expectations. Their outcomes include not only financial performance, but also educational impact, public trust, visitor engagement, social value and institutional resilience. The study addresses this gap by applying the HBLM to a municipal cultural institute operating in an urban educational tourism environment.

1.4 Hybrid organizations and public-mission institutions

Hybrid organizations combine multiple institutional logics that traditionally belong to separate organizational forms. They may pursue social or public missions while also engaging in commercial or revenue-generating activities (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Doherty et al., 2014). Such organizations face distinctive governance challenges because they must balance mission preservation, stakeholder accountability, resource dependence and operational sustainability (Ebrahim et al., 2014). In these settings, leadership is required not only to manage internal efficiency, but also to maintain legitimacy across diverse stakeholder groups. Recent research on hybrid organizing emphasizes the importance of structured flexibility, shared values and adaptive governance. Smith and Besharov (2019) argue that hybrid organizations can sustain competing logics when they develop structures that allow both stability and flexibility. Mair et al. (2015) similarly highlight the governance complexity of hybrid organizations and the need to manage institutional plurality. These insights are closely aligned with sustainable leadership theory, which emphasizes long-term orientation, stakeholder engagement, ethical behavior, organizational learning and resilience. Municipal cultural institutions can be understood as hybrid organizations because they combine public mission, cultural participation, educational value and economic responsibility. They operate within public governance frameworks, but they also need to attract visitors, develop partnerships, generate income and remain relevant in competitive urban experience environments.

1.5 Cultural institutions, visitor environments and organizational resilience

Cultural and educational institutions have become increasingly important actors in contemporary urban environments. Museums, science centers and cultural institutes no longer function only as repositories of knowledge or exhibition spaces. They increasingly operate as participatory learning environments, community platforms and visitor-oriented organizations that support informal education, cultural engagement and urban attractiveness (Falk & Dierking, 2018; Richards, 2021). Recent evidence from Bulgarian museum practice similarly demonstrates that science centers increasingly integrate innovative management approaches, educational programming and visitor-oriented operational models to enhance both institutional sustainability and audience experience (Petkova & Angelov, 2024). In science centers and children's museums, experiential learning, play-based engagement, and interactive formats are central to value creation. These institutions were strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted visitor flows, educational programs, and revenue sources. Reports by UNESCO, ICOM and NEMO show that museums and cultural institutions faced closures, financial pressure and the need to develop new forms of audience engagement during and after the pandemic. Research on cultural resilience suggests that recovery depends not only on reopening physical spaces, but also on institutional adaptability, stakeholder relationships, public trust and the capacity to redesign programs and services (Radermecker, 2021; Cempellin & Crawford, 2023). This makes cultural institutions a relevant context for sustainable leadership research. Their performance cannot be assessed only through profit or visitor numbers.

1.6 Research gap and analytical positioning

The reviewed literature shows that sustainable leadership is increasingly recognized as a strategic approach to long-term organizational viability, stakeholder value and resilience. Previous studies have applied the model in corporations, SMEs, financial institutions and one university context, demonstrating its relevance for understanding employee satisfaction, stakeholder satisfaction, financial performance and organizational sustainability. However, important gaps remain: the HBLM has rarely been applied to hybrid public-mission organizations, cultural institutions, science center's remain largely absent from empirical sustainable leadership research, also existing studies often focus on corporate performance outcomes, while less attention is given to public value, educational impact, visitor engagement and institutional resilience. Last but not least, the relationship between sustainable leadership and organizational resilience after external disruption and governance transformation remains insufficiently explored in cultural and educational settings. The study address these gaps the HBLM to Muzeiko, a municipal cultural institute in Sofia to evaluate its applicability in explaining leadership practices within a hybrid public-mission organization and their contribution to mission continuity, stakeholder engagement, program adaptation and long-term resilience.

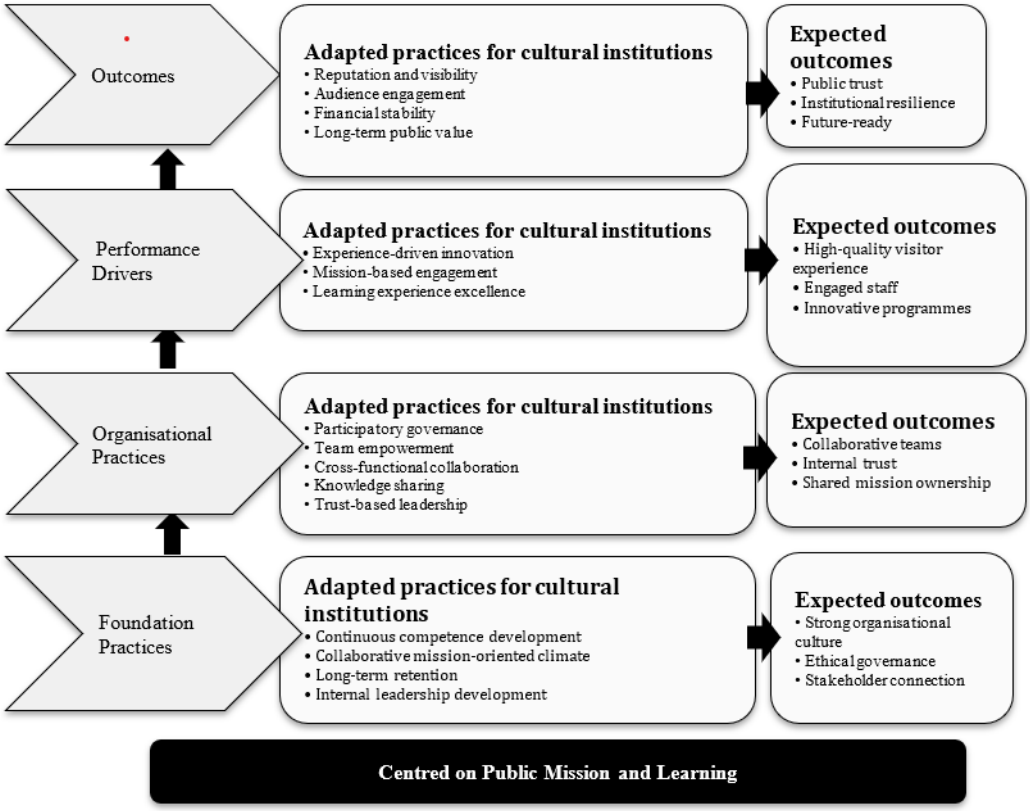
2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research design and analytical framework

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design to investigate the applicability of the HBLM in a hybrid public-mission organization. A qualitative case study is appropriate when the objective is to explore a contemporary organizational phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). Rather than testing causal relationships, the study seeks to understand how sustainable leadership practices are enacted in an organizational setting and how these practices contribute to organizational resilience, mission continuity and long-term sustainability. The case study approach is widely recognized as appropriate for investigating complex organizational processes involving multiple sources of evidence and diverse stakeholder perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since sustainable leadership is embedded in organizational culture, governance structures and everyday practices, examining these phenomena requires an in-depth contextual understanding that cannot be captured through quantitative methods alone. The study focuses

on Muzeiko, an information-rich case because it combines characteristics of a cultural institution, an educational organization and a visitor-oriented attraction while simultaneously operating under a hybrid governance model. Since 2022, the organization has functioned as a Municipal Cultural Institute within Sofia Municipality while continuing to generate a substantial proportion of its operating income through admissions, educational programs, partnerships and commercial activities. This hybrid position makes Muzeiko an appropriate empirical setting for examining sustainable leadership beyond traditional corporate environments. During the study period, Muzeiko experienced two significant external challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted visitor activities and the institutional transformation into a Municipal Cultural Institute in 2022. These developments created an opportunity to investigate how sustainable leadership practices support organizational adaptation while preserving mission continuity and stakeholder relationships. Avery and Bergsteiner (2010, 2011) served as the theoretical framework guiding both data collection and analysis. The model conceptualizes sustainable leadership as an integrated system of 23 mutually reinforcing organizational practices organized into foundation practices, higher-level practices, key performance drivers and long-term organizational outcomes. Using the HBLM as an analytical framework enabled systematic examination of leadership practices across organizational levels while providing a common structure for analysing evidence collected from different sources. The study aims not to test the validity of the HBLM statistically, but to evaluate its analytical applicability within a hybrid public-mission organization and to explore how sustainable leadership practices contribute to organizational resilience and long-term institutional development.

Figure 1: **Adapted sustainable leadership framework for cultural institutions (based on Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011)**



Source: Adapted from Avery and Bergsteiner (2011).

2.2 Case selection and sampling

Case selection followed the principle of purposive sampling, which is commonly employed in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases capable of generating deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Muzeiko was selected because it satisfies several criteria relevant to the research objectives. The organization represents a hybrid institutional form that combines public mission, educational objectives and commercial activities. It has experienced substantial organizational transformation while maintaining continuity of mission and operations, and occupies a distinctive position within Sofia's cultural and educational ecosystem, attracting schools, families, tourists and community organizations. Also, the organization demonstrates characteristics associated with sustainable leadership, including long-term staff development, stakeholder collaboration, program innovation and organizational resilience.

To capture multiple perspectives on leadership practices, purposive participant sampling was also employed. The objective was not statistical representativeness but analytical diversity, ensuring that respondents reflected different organizational roles, responsibilities and stakeholder relationships. A total of twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted during April 2026. Eleven interviews involved internal organizational participants and eighteen interviews involved external stakeholders

collaborating with the organization. Internal participants included representatives from four organizational groups: (1) Senior Management (2 participants), providing strategic and governance perspectives; (2) Program and Educational Staff (5 participants), providing operational and educational perspectives; (3) Administrative Staff (1 participant), contributing insights into organizational processes and internal coordination; (4) Creative and Project-Based Collaborators (3 participants), providing perspectives on project implementation and interdisciplinary teamwork. External participants represented stakeholder groups that interact regularly with Muzeiko and influence or observe its organizational development: (1) Communication agencies (2 participants); (3) Media organizations (4 participants); (4) Event agencies (5 participants); (5) Public administration experts (3 participants); (6) Sofia Tourist Information Center (2 participants); (7) Academic representatives (2 participants). Including both internal and external respondents allowed leadership practices to be examined from complementary perspectives. Internal participants described everyday organizational processes, decision-making practices, organizational culture and staff development, whereas external stakeholders provided independent assessments of organizational reputation, partnership quality, public engagement and institutional development. This combination reduced reliance on a single organizational perspective and strengthened the credibility of the findings through data source triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant recruitment was based on their direct knowledge of organizational practices and their involvement in leadership, program development, institutional cooperation or long-term collaboration with Muzeiko. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and participated voluntarily. To ensure confidentiality, interview quotations and observations are presented through anonymized respondent codes corresponding to participants' organizational roles (e.g., SM, PES, AD, CPBC, EA, TIC).

Interviews were conducted in April 2026 and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts, together with documentary materials, were imported into Microsoft Word for manual coding. Because the study was theory-driven, deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed using the 23 HBLM elements as predefined coding categories. Coding was undertaken by the first author and subsequently reviewed by the second author to discuss interpretations and resolve discrepancies. Rather than calculating statistical inter-coder agreement, reliability was strengthened through researcher discussion, comparison of coding decisions and continuous reference to the theoretical framework. The final interpretation was further strengthened through triangulation of interview evidence, organizational documents and publicly available information.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Overall alignment with the HBLM

To address RQ1 evidence was systematically analyzed across all 23 HBLM elements. The objective was not to determine whether every organizational practice perfectly matched the theoretical model, but rather to assess the extent to which empirical evidence supported the presence of each leadership practice. Table 2 represents an analytical interpretation of the collected evidence rather than a quantitative evaluation. The three categories: strongly evidenced**,** moderately evidenced, and emerging evidence reflect the relative strength and consistency of empirical support identified across interviews and documentary sources. A classification of strongly evidenced was assigned when multiple independent sources consistently supported a particular HBLM element. Moderately evidenced indicates that the practice was clearly identifiable but supported by fewer examples or primarily by one category of evidence. Emerging evidence refers to practices for which only partial or indirect evidence was identified. This classification should be interpreted as reflecting the robustness of empirical support rather than the organizational importance of individual leadership practices.

Table 2: **Analysis of organizational practices according to the HBLM**

No.	HBLM element	Main empirical evidence	Primary evidence sources	Level of evidence
1	Developing people continuously	Continuous professional development, international training, Erasmus participation, mentoring by Scientific Board members	Interviews; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
2	Amicable labor relations	Collaborative working environment; Supportive interpersonal relationships	Interviews	Moderately evidenced
3	Retaining staff	Long-term staff retention, including employees with more than ten years of service	Interviews	Moderately evidenced
4	Internal succession planning	Career progression from internships and operational positions to managerial roles; Long-term retention of key personnel; Continuity of organizational expertise;	Interviews; Public media materials; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
5	Valuing people	Recognition of employee contributions, mentoring, continuous learning opportunities	Interviews; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
6	CEO and top-team leadership	Leadership focused on institutional mission; Organizational development rather than individual authority	Interviews; organizational documents	Moderately evidenced
7	Ethical behavior	Internal ethical standards; Mission-oriented decision-making; Public commitment to children's rights; Responsible visitor engagement;	Interviews; Institutional policies; Organizational documents; Public communication materials;	Strongly evidenced
8	Long-term perspective	Strong emphasis on children's lifelong learning and educational impact; Mission-driven educational impact; Science based educational approach;	Organizational documents; interviews; Public communication materials;	Strongly evidenced
9	Independence from financial markets	Hybrid funding model combining municipal support and self-generated revenue	Public financial information; interviews	Strongly evidenced
10	Considered organizational change	Successful transition to Municipal Cultural Institute without disruption of operations	Interviews; public documents	Strongly evidenced
11	Environmental responsibility	Sustainable building design and environmental education programs	Organizational documents	Moderately evidenced
12	Social responsibility	Educational programs, community engagement and inclusive activities	Interviews; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
13	Stakeholder approach	Extensive partnerships with schools, NGOs, public institutions, universities, private organizations	Interviews; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
14	Strong shared vision	Mission centered on learning through experience and science education	Interviews; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
15	Consensual decision-making	Collaborative planning and distributed operational decision-making	Interviews	Moderately evidenced
16	Self-management	Operational autonomy through rotating coordination roles (LASO and DELTA)	Interviews	Moderately evidenced
17	Team orientation	Interdisciplinary teamwork embedded in program delivery; Cross-functional collaboration; Shared responsibility; Collaborative program development and problem-solving;	Interviews; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
18	Enabling culture	Creative, supportive and mission-oriented organizational climate; Openness to new ideas; Continuous learning and professional development;	Interviews; Public communication materials;	Strongly evidenced
19	Knowledge sharing and retention	Mentoring, collaborative learning and knowledge exchange across teams	Interviews	Moderately evidenced
20	Trust	Long-term cooperation, stable teams and informal collaboration	Interviews	Moderately evidenced
21	Strategic and systemic innovation	Continuous development of exhibitions, STEAM programs and visitor experiences	Interviews; organizational documents	Strongly evidenced
22	Staff engagement	High employee commitment; active participation in organizational development; Strong identification with the organizational mission; Long-term engagement in organizational initiatives;	Interviews; Public communication materials;	Strongly evidenced
23	Quality	High-quality visitor experience supported by program design, continuous adaptation and strong institutional reputation	Interviews; organizational documents; visitor statistics	Strongly evidenced

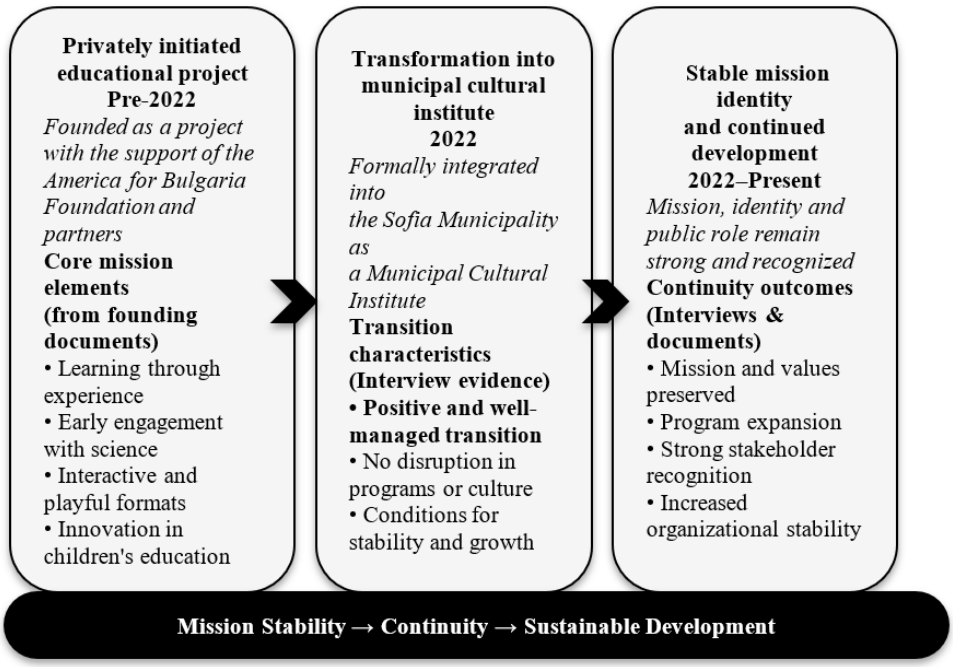
Source: Authors' analysis based on interview data, documentary evidence and public institutional information.

The analysis demonstrates that empirical evidence was identified for all elements of the HBLM, although the strength of evidence varied across individual practices. Foundation practices associated with organizational mission, stakeholder orientation, long-term perspective, people development and organizational change received the strongest empirical support because they were consistently confirmed by both interview participants and documentary sources. In contrast, practices such as consensual decision-making, self-management, knowledge sharing and trust were primarily supported through interview evidence and were assessed as moderately evidenced. This differentiation suggests that the organization demonstrates a broad alignment with the HBLM while also illustrating that not all sustainable leadership practices are equally visible or equally documented. The findings support the applicability of the HBLM in a hybrid public-mission organization without implying that every leadership practice is implemented to the same extent. The analysis indicates that the HBLM provides a useful framework for understanding leadership beyond traditional corporate settings. Rather than focusing exclusively on financial performance, the identified leadership practices are closely associated with mission continuity, stakeholder engagement, organizational learning and adaptive capacity. These characteristics are particularly relevant in organizations whose primary objective is the creation of educational and social value rather than shareholder returns. Having established the overall applicability of the HBLM, the following sections examine how these leadership practices are manifested across the different levels of the model and how they contribute to organizational resilience and long-term institutional development. The identification of all model dimensions in a hybrid public-mission organization suggests that the applicability of the HBLM extends beyond traditional corporate settings and can also capture leadership practices in organizations combining educational and social objectives with revenue-generating activities.

3.2 Foundation practices and mission stability

The first level of the HBLM comprises the organizational foundation practices that enable sustainable leadership over the long term. The empirical evidence indicates that these foundational practices are strongly embedded in Muzeiko and preserved organizational continuity during its institutional transformation in 2022. Documentary sources show that Muzeiko was established as a private educational initiative supported by the America for Bulgaria Foundation in partnership with academic and public organizations. Since its inception, the organization has consistently pursued a mission centered on experiential learning, early engagement with science and interactive educational experiences for children (Muzeiko, *The First 10*). As illustrated in Figure 2, the transition to a Municipal Cultural Institute in 2022 did not alter these core principles. Several participants noted that they either perceived no substantial organizational disruption or were unaware that a formal administrative transformation had occurred (M3, EA2, TIC1). As one media representative involved in Muzeiko's launch recalled, "For the past 10 years Muzeiko has inspired children to discover knowledge, new information and inspiration" (M3). These findings provide strong empirical support for the HBLM practices related to long-term orientation, stakeholder focus and considered organizational change.

Figure 2: **Mission stability and sustainable leadership**



Source: Authors 'own elaboration

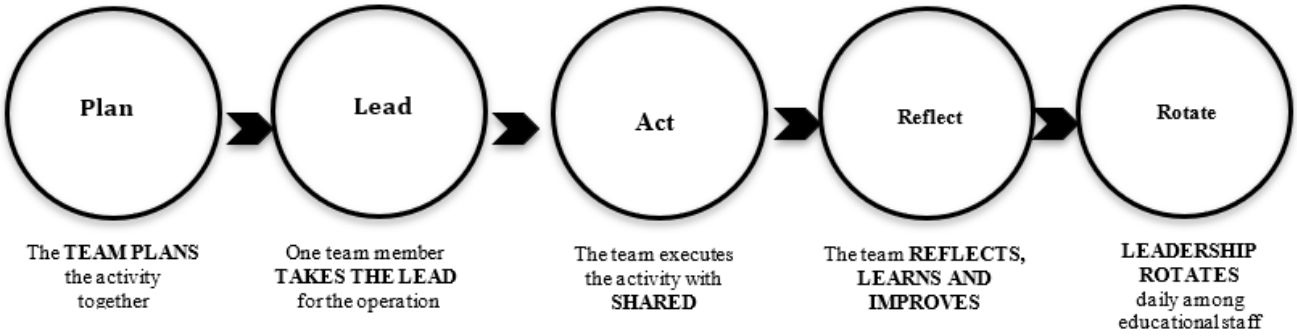
Interview participants consistently reported that professional development opportunities expanded following the institutional transformation. Educational staff described increased participation in specialized professional training, Erasmus mobility programs, international conferences and knowledge exchange initiatives involving not only senior managers but also program coordinators and operational staff (PES1, PES3, PES5, CPBC, CA1, AD). As one program staff member explained, "I really appreciate that international training opportunities are not reserved only for managers. We also have the chance to participate,

learn and bring new ideas back to the team." (PES3). Documentary evidence similarly confirms increased institutional participation in international educational networks and professional collaborations. These findings indicate that investment in human capital remained a strategic priority throughout the organizational change. The analysis also supports internal succession planning and employee retention. Rather than relying primarily on external recruitment for leadership positions, interview participants described several examples of internal career progression. Employees reported moving from internships and operational positions into expert, coordination and managerial roles, suggesting that leadership capacity is developed internally over time (PES1, AD). The organization has retained a number of long-serving employees whose organizational knowledge contributes to continuity and mentoring of newer staff members. Although evidence for staff retention is less extensive than for professional development, it supports the presence of sustainable people-management practices consistent with the HBLM. Another finding concerns stakeholder orientation and social responsibility. Respondents described Muzeiko as an organization strongly committed to public education, community engagement and collaboration with external partners. Schools, universities, municipalities, non-governmental organizations and private-sector partners were consistently identified as active contributors to program development and educational initiatives. Consequently, the first level of the HBLM receives strong empirical support and provides the organizational foundation upon which the higher-level leadership practices discussed in the following section are built.

3.3 Higher-level practices and key performance drivers

The second and third levels of the HBLM comprise organizational practices that build upon the foundation practices presented in the previous section. The empirical findings indicate that these practices are embedded in Muzeiko's organizational culture and are reflected in the way everyday work is organized, coordinated and continuously improved. Interview participants consistently described leadership as a collaborative process characterized by shared responsibility and active employee participation.

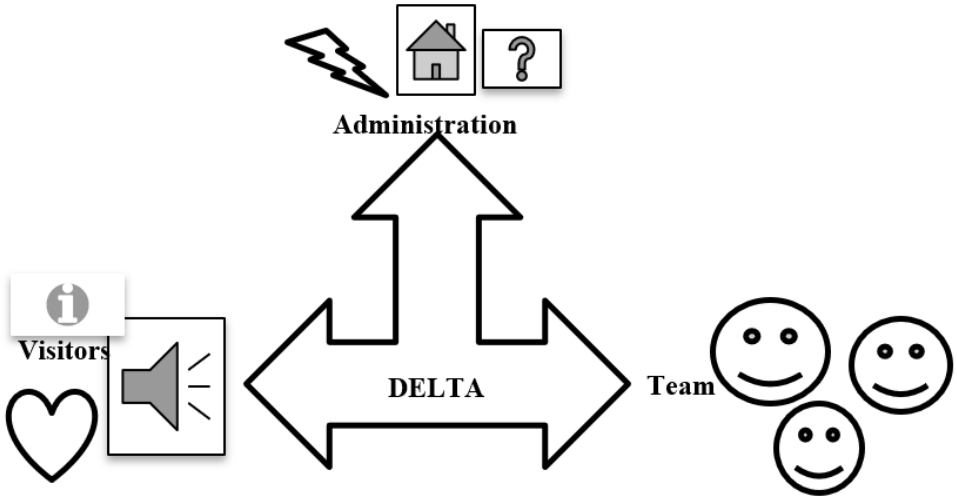
Figure 3: **Lead Action in Science Operation (LASO)**



Source: Authors 'own elaboration

Respondents emphasized that organizational discussions encourage the exchange of ideas across departments and that employees are expected to contribute actively to solving operational challenges. Several interviewees described the organizational culture as open, supportive and based on mutual trust, allowing employees to participate in decision-making beyond their formal responsibilities. As one newly appointed educational staff member recalled after being invited to suggest ideas for enriching an educational program, "Everyone is encouraged to express an opinion, regardless of position." (PES5). The interviews further demonstrated that collaborative leadership is reinforced through Muzeiko's internal organizational structures, particularly the LASO and DELTA teams. Interview participants consistently described these structures as important mechanisms for maintaining flexibility and organizational coherence, particularly during periods of organizational growth and institutional change. From the perspective of the HBLM, the LASO and DELTA structures provide empirical evidence of self-management, team orientation and knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing emerged as a recurring theme across both internal and external interviews. Interviewees also reported that lessons learned from completed projects are regularly discussed within teams and incorporated into future program development. As one educational staff member who returned to Muzeiko after the institutional transformation explained: "After completed projects, we now discuss what worked and what can be improved. I appreciate that top management is open to hearing the team's feedback." (PES2). Trust similarly appeared as a central characteristic of the organizational culture. External stakeholders also described Muzeiko as a reliable partner characterized by long-term cooperation, professional consistency and transparent communication. The convergence of internal and external perspectives suggests that trust is not simply an interpersonal characteristic but an organizational resource supporting collaboration, knowledge exchange and adaptive capacity. These findings provide empirical support for the Honeybee practices of knowledge sharing and trust.

Figure 4: **Daily Engagement Lead and Team Activation (DELTA)**



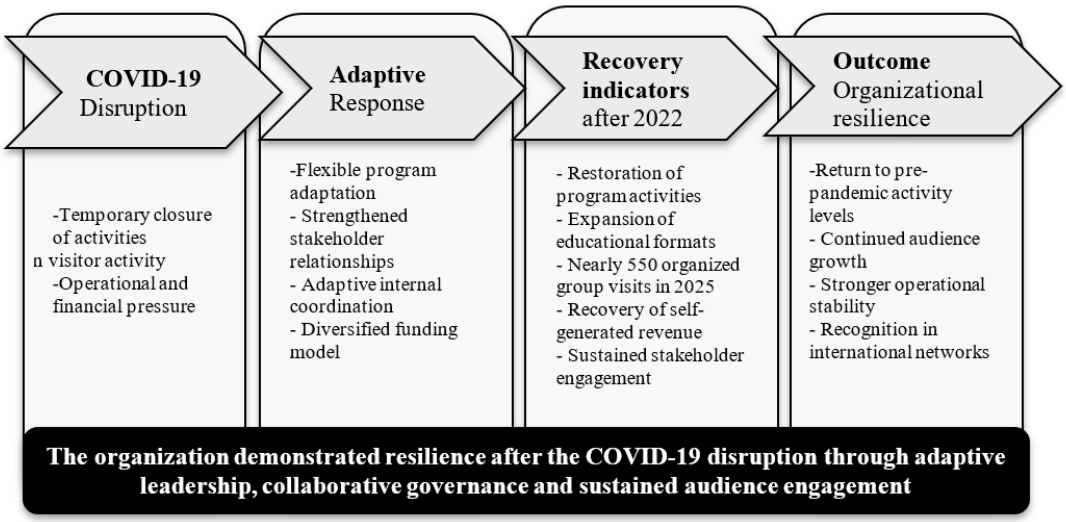
Source: Authors 'own elaboration based on interview data

Interview participants consistently associated Muzeiko with continuous innovation in educational programming and visitor engagement. Respondents frequently emphasized their commitment to the organization's educational mission and their motivation to contribute beyond formally assigned responsibilities. Opportunities for professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration and creative participation were repeatedly identified as factors supporting employee motivation and long-term organizational commitment. This long-term development was illustrated by one educational team member who initially joined Muzeiko as a university volunteer collaborating on a project in 2017 and has since become one of the organization's key educational content developers. As she explained: "Working at Muzeiko has allowed me not only to build on my scientific expertise, but also to become a science communicator, bringing science closer to people." (PES1). Documentary evidence reinforces these observations through the continuous expansion of educational program, participation in international projects and recognition received from professional organizations. External stakeholders similarly highlighted the organization's ability to deliver high-quality educational experiences while maintaining strong professional standards.

3.4 Performance outcomes

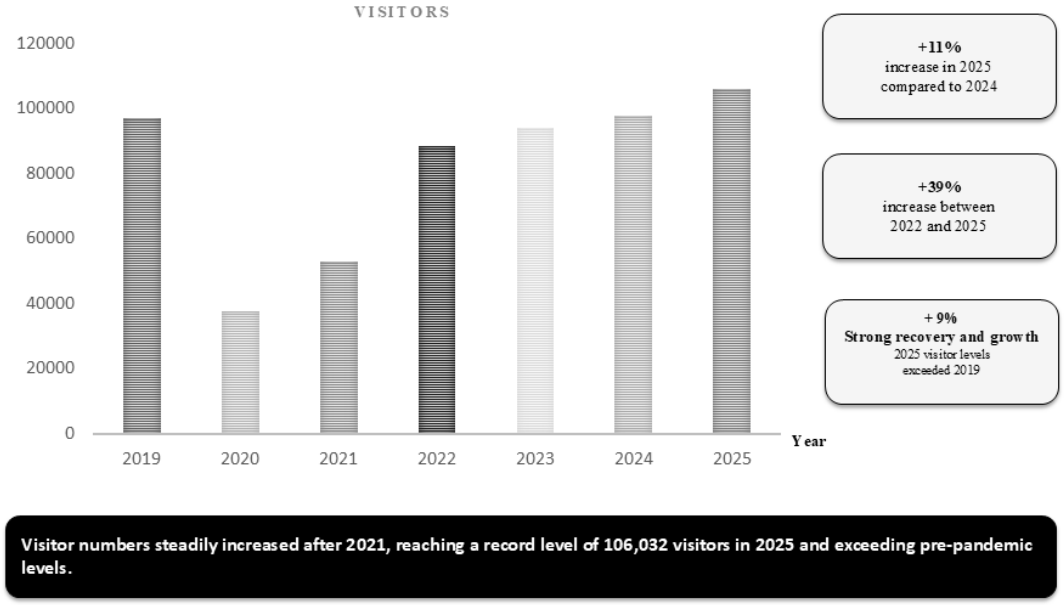
The fourth level of the HBLM focuses on the long-term organizational outcomes that emerge from the interaction of sustainable leadership practices. The third research question examined how the leadership practices identified in the previous sections contributed to Muzeiko's long-term organizational development following the COVID-19 pandemic and the institutional transformation completed in 2022. The empirical evidence indicates that Muzeiko maintained organizational continuity throughout the institutional transition from a privately established science center to a Municipal Cultural Institute. Documentary evidence confirms that the organization preserved its educational mission, program portfolio and governance objectives while integrating into the municipal institutional framework. Interview participants consistently reported that the transition did not interrupt everyday organizational activities or significantly alter the visitor experience. Visitor statistics and organizational records indicate continued organizational growth following the pandemic and the institutional transformation. After the significant decline in attendance during the COVID-19 restrictions, visitor numbers gradually recovered and subsequently exceeded pre-pandemic levels. External respondents repeatedly described Muzeiko as one of Sofia's leading educational and cultural attractions for children, emphasizing the organization's strong public reputation and consistently high-quality visitor experience. Together, the quantitative indicators and stakeholder perceptions suggest that organizational performance was maintained and strengthened despite periods of considerable external uncertainty. A recurring finding across the interviews concerns the strength of Muzeiko's relationships with external stakeholders. As the Academic Representative explained: "Muzeiko is our faculty's preferred partner because we know we can rely on the team and its collaborative approach." (AR). The combined evidence from interviews, documentary sources and organizational records demonstrates several characteristics associated with organizational resilience. The educational programs continued to evolve through continuous innovation and adaptation. Visitor participation, stakeholder partnerships and organizational activities recovered following the pandemic, indicating the organization's capacity to maintain public relevance under changing circumstances. Respondents consistently described a stable organizational culture characterized by employee commitment, collaboration and shared responsibility.

Figure 5: **Evidence map of organizational recovery after COVID-19**



Source: Authors 'own elaboration based on interview data and documentary analysis

Figure 6: **Growth of total visitors (2019–2025)**



Source: Authors 'owns elaboration based on internal visitor statistics

Although evidence was identified for all HBLM dimensions, the analysis also revealed variation in the maturity of specific practices. Practices associated with participatory decision-making, knowledge sharing and self-management relied primarily on interview evidence and were less formally institutionalized than mission orientation or stakeholder engagement. This suggests that sustainable leadership within Muzeiko remains an evolving organizational capability rather than a fully developed system across all dimensions.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Extending the applicability of the HBLM

The first research question concerned the applicability of the HBLM in a hybrid public-mission organization. The findings indicate that all four levels of the model, including foundation practices, higher-level organizational practices, key performance drivers and long-term outcomes were reflected in Muzeiko's organizational practices, although the empirical strength of individual elements varied. This finding extends previous research, which has applied the HBLM predominantly in private companies, manufacturing organizations, SMEs and financial institutions (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Suriyankietkaew & Avery, 2016; Kantabutra & Avery, 2013). The findings support Avery and Bergsteiner's proposition that sustainable leadership should be understood as an integrated organizational system rather than a sector-specific management approach. The analysis also highlights differences between corporate and hybrid public organizations. This suggests that the performance dimension of the HBLM should be interpreted more broadly when applied in public-oriented organizations, where organizational success encompasses social legitimacy alongside financial sustainability.

4.2 Sustainable leadership in hybrid public-mission organizations

The findings contribute to the growing literature on hybrid organizations by illustrating how sustainable leadership supports the coexistence of multiple institutional logics. Previous research argues that hybrid organizations continuously balance public missions with commercial sustainability and require governance mechanisms capable of integrating competing organizational objectives (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Doherty et al., 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019). The findings support arguments that hybrid organizations benefit from leadership approaches emphasizing collaboration, stakeholder orientation and long-term organizational learning (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Mair et al., 2015). The finding suggests that sustainable leadership may facilitate institutional continuity during organizational transformation, particularly when leadership practices are embedded in organizational culture rather than dependent upon individual leaders.

4.3 Sustainable leadership and organizational resilience

The third research question explored how sustainable leadership practices contribute to organizational resilience. The findings indicate that organizational resilience should not be understood simply as recovery following disruption but as an organizational capability developed through long-term leadership practices. Previous resilience research emphasizes that resilient organizations are characterized by adaptive capacity, organizational learning and stakeholder engagement (Linnenluecke, 2017; Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). The present findings support these arguments by showing that organizational resilience emerged from the interaction of several HBLM practices rather than from isolated managerial interventions. The findings extend existing sustainable leadership research by suggesting that resilience represents an emergent outcome of integrated leadership practices rather than an independent organizational capability. In the present case, resilience was reflected in the continuation of the organizational mission, the recovery of visitor engagement and self-generated revenue, the expansion of educational programs and the strengthening of institutional partnerships. Together, these outcomes illustrate how sustainable leadership contributes to adaptive capacity while preserving organizational identity.

4.4 Theoretical and practical implications

The study extends the empirical application of the HBLM beyond traditional corporate environments to a hybrid public-mission organization. It contributes to sustainable leadership theory by demonstrating that the 23 HBLM practices remain relevant even when organizational success is measured primarily through public value, educational impact and stakeholder engagement rather than shareholder returns. It strengthens the conceptual relationship between sustainable leadership and organizational resilience by illustrating how resilience develops through the interaction of leadership practices embedded within organizational culture. The findings also have practical implications for managers of cultural institutions, museums, science centers and other hybrid organizations. The study suggests that sustainable leadership should not be viewed as a separate sustainability initiative but as an organizational philosophy embedded in governance, people management and stakeholder relationships. Also, the findings suggest that the HBLM may provide a useful diagnostic framework for evaluating leadership practices in organizations operating at the intersection of education, culture and public service. Future research could test the model across multiple cultural institutions, museums and public organizations to examine the transferability of these findings and further refine the application of sustainable leadership theory within hybrid organizational settings.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that the HBLM provides a useful analytical framework for examining leadership beyond its traditional corporate context. Evidence was identified across all four levels of the model, including foundation practices, higher-level organizational practices, performance drivers and long-term organizational outcomes. The analysis shows that sustainable leadership in the case organization is characterized by continuous staff development, collaborative governance, stakeholder orientation, organizational learning, program innovation and long-term mission commitment. Previous applications of the HBLM have primarily evaluated organizational success through financial performance, competitive advantage and shareholder value. The present findings suggest that, in hybrid organizations, the mechanisms through which sustainable leadership creates long-term success differ substantially. The study also contributes to the literature on hybrid organizations by demonstrating that sustainable leadership can serve as an integrating mechanism between public mission and operational sustainability. A further theoretical contribution concerns the relationship between sustainable leadership and organizational resilience. The findings suggest that resilience should not be understood solely as an organization's capacity to recover from external shocks. Instead, resilience emerges from the cumulative interaction of multiple Honeybee leadership practices, including trust-based relationships, distributed leadership, staff development, stakeholder collaboration and continuous innovation, that collectively strengthen adaptive capacity while preserving organizational identity. In this respect, the study advances sustainable leadership theory by positioning organizational resilience as an emergent outcome of integrated leadership practices rather than an isolated organizational capability.

The study also has practical implications for managers of museums, science centers, cultural institutions and other hybrid public organizations. It demonstrates that sustainable leadership is not limited to formal sustainability strategies or environmental initiatives

but is embedded in everyday organizational practices, including collaborative decision-making, investment in people, stakeholder engagement and long-term strategic orientation. Although the study triangulated interviews with documentary evidence and publicly available organizational information, future research could incorporate longitudinal designs, comparative case studies and quantitative performance indicators to examine the transferability of the findings across different cultural and public-sector organizations. Future research should also investigate the applicability of the HBLM across other hybrid organizational settings, including museums, universities, public service organizations and creative-sector institutions. Comparative studies across countries and governance systems could further clarify how institutional context influences the implementation of sustainable leadership practices. Such research would contribute to refining the HBLM as a theoretical framework capable of explaining sustainable leadership across a wider range of organizational forms.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In preparing this paper, the authors used ChatGPT by OpenAI for language refinement, text structuring and editorial support during the writing process. Following the use of this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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