



Responsible Leadership: Exploring its Characteristics in the German Business Context

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Abstract

Title: Responsible Leadership: Exploring its Characteristics in the German Business Context

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In an era of increasing environmental and social pressures, responsible leadership has become essential. This dissertation examines responsible leadership in Germany, focusing on the traits and practices crucial in today's dynamic business environment. Building on findings from the Center for Responsible Business and Leadership at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics (2022), this research identifies universal and context-specific elements of responsible leadership. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and semi-structured interviews, the study explores the perceived characteristics and responsibilities attributed to responsible leaders in Germany. The results show that there is a strong focus on internal stakeholders, such as employees and customers, while revealing significant gaps in perceived responsibilities toward external stakeholders, like NGOs and government institutions. While this internal focus aligns with ethical and relational leadership theories, it may hinder the broader implementation of responsible leadership, which requires balancing the interests of all stakeholders. Despite theoretical support, practical challenges persist, including the tension between short-term business demands and long-term responsible practices, as well as the persistence of traditional hierarchical structures. The study suggests that to fully implement responsible leadership, German companies must restructure practices, reduce bureaucracy, and align leadership rhetoric with actions. Management should prioritize long-term impacts, maintain authentic leadership, and adapt to the evolving expectations of younger leaders. Future research should explore the integration of external stakeholders, assess long-term outcomes across industries and cultures, and consider potential drawbacks to provide a more balanced perspective.

Keywords: Responsible Leadership, Leadership Characteristics, Leadership Theory, Stakeholder Management, Comparative Leadership Study, Cultural Differences in Leadership, German Leadership Practices, Organizational Culture

Sumário

Título: Liderança responsável: Explorando as suas características no contexto empresarial alemão

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Numa era de crescentes pressões ambientais e sociais, a liderança responsável tornou-se essencial. Esta dissertação analisa a liderança responsável na Alemanha, focando-se nas características e práticas cruciais no ambiente empresarial atual. Baseada nos resultados do Centro de Liderança e Negócios Responsáveis da Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics (2022), esta investigação identifica elementos universais e específicos da liderança responsável. Utilizando métodos mistos, como questionários e entrevistas semi-estruturadas, o estudo examina as características e responsabilidades atribuídas aos líderes responsáveis na Alemanha. Os resultados mostram uma forte ênfase nas partes interessadas internas, como empregados e clientes, mas também revelam lacunas significativas na atenção às partes interessadas externas, como ONG e instituições governamentais. Esse foco interno, embora em linha com as teorias de liderança ética e relacional, pode limitar a implementação plena da liderança responsável, que exige o equilíbrio entre os interesses de todas as partes interessadas. Desafios práticos persistem, como a tensão entre exigências comerciais de curto prazo e práticas responsáveis a longo prazo, além da permanência de estruturas hierárquicas tradicionais. O estudo sugere que, para implementar plenamente a liderança responsável, as empresas devem reduzir a burocracia e alinhar ações à retórica. A gestão deve priorizar impactos a longo prazo, manter uma liderança autêntica e adaptar-se às expectativas dos líderes mais jovens. Pesquisas futuras devem explorar a integração das partes interessadas externas, avaliar resultados de longo prazo em diferentes sectores e culturas e considerar possíveis desvantagens.

Palavras-chave: Liderança Responsável, Características da Liderança, Teoria da Liderança, Gestão das Partes Interessadas, Estudo Comparativo da Liderança, Diferenças Culturais na Liderança, Práticas de Liderança Alemãs, Cultura Organizacional

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IV. List of Abbreviations

CRB	Center for Responsible Business & Leadership at Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSRD	Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
e.g.	Exempli gratia – For example
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
GCGC	German Corporate Governance Code
IT	Information Technology
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
TBL	Triple Bottom Line
WEF	World Economic Forum

1. Introduction

1.1 Relevance of the Topic

In today's rapidly changing world, responsible leadership has become essential as businesses face increasing pressure to rethink traditional leadership models. The global business environment has grown more complex, driven by challenges like climate change, social inequality, and ethical governance, highlighted by corporate scandals and financial crises (Pless & Maak, 2011; Muff et al., 2020; Storbeck, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) mandates European companies to disclose environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices, reinforcing the need for leaders who prioritize responsible behavior and integrate sustainability into corporate strategies (European Commission, 2024; United Nations, 2015; George et al., 2016; WEF, 2020).

German businesses increasingly recognize the importance of leadership grounded in moral integrity and sustainability (Witt & Stahl, 2016; Climate Change Act, 2021). The role of leadership has evolved from managing financial outcomes to steering organizations towards a more sustainable and socially responsible future (Christensen, 2024). However, the declining interest in leadership roles among young professionals in Germany presents an additional challenge (Oktay-Gür, 2024). This study explores how German business leaders perceive and implement responsible leadership within their cultural and regulatory context, addressing what it means to be a responsible leader in today's interconnected global marketplace.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Objectives

As businesses strive to remain competitive while meeting growing ethical and sustainability expectations, understanding the characteristics of responsible leadership has become a priority for management (Knight & Paterson, 2018). The current literature demonstrates a gap between theoretical ideals and their implementation in diverse cultural and organizational settings (CRB, 2022; Waldman et al., 2020). Responsible leadership cannot be viewed as a one-size-fits-all approach, as leaders vary in how they prioritize economic, social, and ethical responsibilities (Pless et al., 2012). Additionally, research on responsible leadership in the German business context remains limited, posing challenges for organizations striving to operationalize it consistently (Edinger-Schons & Alberg-Seberich, 2022).

Drawing on both theoretical frameworks and empirical insights from surveys and interviews, this research aims to identify the traits and competencies German business leaders consider

essential for responsible leadership, and how they are applied in practice. It also builds upon a study conducted by the Center for Responsible Business and Leadership (CRB) at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics in 2022, comparing leadership perceptions in Germany, Portugal, and the United States. The author anticipates that responsible leadership is not just a guiding principle in Germany, but a deeply rooted element of the country's corporate culture, which is characterized by an interplay of ethical standards, legal frameworks, and social expectations.

Accordingly, the primary objective is to explore the characteristics that define responsible leadership in Germany, contributing to the global discourse on responsible leadership. The primary research question is: *“What defines responsible leadership in the German business context?”*

This question is broken down into five secondary research questions that address specific gaps identified in the literature:

1. *What key characteristics of leadership do German leaders consider essential in a rapidly evolving environment?*
2. *How do German leaders perceive and interpret the concept of responsible leadership?*
3. *How do cultural and contextual factors influence the understanding and implementation of responsible leadership in Germany, particularly in comparison to other countries like Portugal and the United States?*
4. *What factors facilitate the implementation of responsible leadership, and what are the major challenges that German leaders encounter in this regard?*
5. *What steps should be taken to further adopt and integrate responsible leadership practices in Germany's business landscape?*

By addressing these questions, this thesis aims to make a meaningful contribution to the elaboration of responsible leadership as a critical component of business strategy in Germany.

This thesis is organized into six chapters. The introduction sets out the research questions and objectives. The literature review explores core concepts of responsible leadership, situating the theory within relevant frameworks, with emphasis on Germany. The methodology details the use of online surveys and interviews, comparing results from Germany, Portugal, and the U.S., and covers research design, data analysis, and interview themes. The fourth chapter presents and critiques the research findings, discussing their implications for management practices.

The study's limitations are then addressed, followed by a conclusion summarizing key findings and proposing future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Concept of Responsible Leadership

This chapter maps the research landscape of responsible leadership, examining its definition, conceptual foundations, and development in academic literature. It highlights the core principles and rising importance of responsible leadership, which has become a central theme in leadership studies in recent years. This approach to leadership is distinguished by its focus on ethical conduct, stakeholder involvement, and the creation of sustainable value. At its core, leadership is not merely a quality or attribute of an individual, rather, it is a dynamic process of interaction within groups to achieve common goals (Northouse, 2012). In this work, the term “leader” is preferred over “manager” to underline the pivotal role that leadership plays following the notion that responsible leadership extends beyond conventional leadership roles to encompass the shaping of a vision, the nurturing of organizational culture, and the development of future leaders, all of which are vital to the long-term success of an organization (Voigt & Guariglia, 2015; Greige Frangieh & Khayr Yaacoub, 2017).

Responsible leadership has attracted considerable attention as business leaders increasingly realize that balancing social responsibility with profit maximization can lead to sustained success (Waldman & Siegel, 2008). The concept of “Creating Shared Value” by Porter and Kramer (2011) reinforces this idea, indicating that companies can achieve financial success while addressing social and environmental issues. Consequently, leaders are encouraged to develop strategies that align business goals with social progress (Porter & Kramer, 2011). However, responsible leadership is inherently complex and multidimensional, as Maak & Pless (2006) emphasize. In their social-relational framework, the significance of relationships and stakeholder engagement for sustainable value creation is particularly highlighted. Hence, the core of responsible leadership is its social, relational, and ethical aspects, where leaders engage in a network of relationships with various stakeholders to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes (Maak & Pless, 2006). Moreover, responsible leadership goes beyond managing competing interests and seeks to align stakeholder needs with the organization's strategic goals (Waldman & Siegel, 2008). Leaders are expected to demonstrate accountability, transparency, and a commitment to the well-being of all stakeholders, incorporating their interests into the decision-making process (Maak & Pless, 2006). This commitment extends beyond

organizational goals to broader global challenges, such as poverty, human rights, and environmental sustainability (Pless & Maak, 2011). Responsible leadership, therefore, is not only about achieving business success but also about making ethically sound decisions that positively impact society and the environment (Cameron, 2011; Voegtlin, 2016; Han et al., 2019). To sum up, responsible leadership begins at the micro level, where individual leaders influence their organization's approach to economic, ethical, and social responsibilities. It extends to the group and organizational level, shaping culture and fostering ethical decision-making. At the societal and global level, responsible leadership addresses sustainability, regulatory compliance, and global stakeholder pressures. Ultimately, it is highly contextual, influenced by cultural, organizational, and personal factors that shape how leaders perceive and execute their roles (Waldman & Balven, 2014).

The theoretical foundation of responsible leadership is enhanced by a variety of perspectives, while the seminal work of Maak & Pless (2006) remains a foundational element within contemporary research. These sources are cited in brief to demonstrate that the field is responding flexibly and adaptively to emerging leadership challenges. Cameron (2011) defines responsible leadership as virtuous leadership, emphasizing moral character. Waldman and Siegel (2008) stress the integration of corporate social responsibility (CSR) into company strategy, balancing ethics with business goals. Stahl and Sully de Luque (2014) distinguish between proscriptive morality (“avoiding harm”) and prescriptive morality (“doing good”), advocating for leaders to take philanthropic activities that contribute to social welfare while avoiding harmful behaviors like discrimination and environmental damage. Voegtlin (2016) underlines the forward-thinking and collective efforts next to ethical awareness and long-term sustainability in leadership. Furthermore, responsible leadership influences organizational citizenship behavior for the environment, as leaders serve as role models, inspiring employees to adopt environmentally conscious values (Han et al., 2019). In this context, social learning theory suggests that employees imitate the sustainable behaviors of their leaders, fostering a culture of sustainability (Bandura, 1977; Han et al., 2019). Miska et al. (2014) propose a "converging views" perspective that integrates economic and ethical responsibilities, where leaders are motivated by both monetary and non-monetary incentives. Financial incentives, such as profitability and economic growth, are balanced with non-monetary factors like ethical fulfillment, reputation, and a commitment to acting responsibly within society. Agarwal and Bhal (2020) offer a framework that includes ethical behavior, promoting ethics within the organization, considering diverse stakeholder interests, and focusing on sustainable growth.

For the operationalization, assessment, and development of responsible leadership in practice, the competency model proposed by Muff et al. (2020) is particularly relevant and will be succinctly introduced. The authors identified five key dimensions that are seen as crucial for leaders to effectively navigate the complex and interconnected challenges of modern business. Firstly, stakeholder relations highlight the need for leaders to build strong, trust-based connections with internal and external stakeholders. Leaders must handle diverse and sometimes conflicting interests while promoting long-term cooperation. Ethical integrity is also essential, as it requires leaders to act according to moral principles, make ethical decisions, and serve as role models by prioritizing honesty and fairness. Self-awareness is another important aspect. Responsible leaders should understand their strengths, weaknesses, and how their actions affect others. This awareness helps them reflect, learn, and adapt continuously, supporting authentic leadership. Additionally, systems thinking is vital, as leaders need to understand how different parts of the organization are connected and how their decisions impact the bigger picture. Leaders must consider the long-term effects of their actions and work across different areas to manage complex challenges. Finally, the ability to lead change and innovation is a key skill for responsible leadership. Leaders should encourage creativity, challenge existing practices, and guide initiatives that promote sustainable and ethical business approaches, driving organizational transformation (Muff et al., 2020).

Lastly, it is important to mention, when comparing responsible leadership to related leadership theories such as ethical, transformational, authentic, and servant leadership, it distinguishes itself by its focus on creating sustainable value for all stakeholders while committing to higher social and environmental responsibilities (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin, 2016; Waldman & Siegel, 2008; Han et al., 2019).

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

By reviewing key theoretical frameworks, this chapter aims to establish a clear understanding of responsible leadership, setting the stage for further analysis in the context of German business practices. To maintain a focused scope, this study prioritizes frameworks that offer a broad perspective on the interplay between leadership and sustainability, specifically the stakeholder theory and the triple bottom line (TBL) within the context of CSR. These leadership theories closely align with the concept of responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006).

Figure 1 illustrates the timeline of key concepts related to responsible leadership, highlighting the progression and understanding of responsible leadership over time.

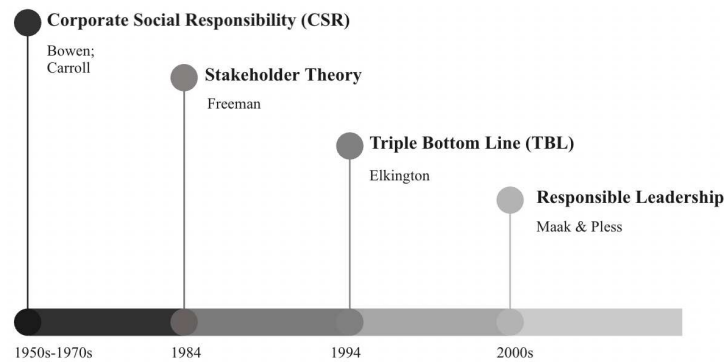


Figure 1: Timeline of Key Concepts

One of the most fundamental developments in the management style of organizations over recent decades has been the transition from a focus solely on profit maximization for shareholders to a more stakeholder-oriented management approach (Freeman et al., 2010; Miska et al., 2014). The stakeholder theory, coined by R. Edward Freeman (1984) posits that organizations have responsibilities to any person or group that is affected by the activities of a company in a positive or negative sense. Thus, the stakeholder theory challenges the traditional economic view of the firm, where a leader's primary responsibility is to maximize profits for shareholders solely within the bounds of law and therefore aims for a more sustainable business environment (Friedman, 1962; Mulligan, 1986; Freeman, 1994). This theory advocates for reframing capitalism to add an ethical responsibility component of a leader to prioritize value creation for all stakeholders without resorting to trade-offs (Freeman et al., 2010; Miska et al., 2014; Sorkin, 2020; Abraham, 2024). This theory underlines that long-term success can only be achieved if companies incorporate the needs and expectations of all stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and society into their strategic decisions (Freeman, et al., 2010). Consequently, responsible leadership extends stakeholder theory by positioning leaders not just as decision-makers, but as stewards of balanced and sustainable stakeholder relationships, ensuring that these relationships are nurtured and aligned with the broader goals of ethical and responsible business practices (Maak & Pless, 2006).

Stakeholder theory builds on the foundation of CSR by offering a framework for identifying the various groups that companies should engage with and manage effectively (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). The modern concept of CSR began to emerge in the 1950s, with Howard Bowen (1953) as a key figure in its development. Bowen argued that businesses have responsibilities beyond profit maximization, defining CSR as the obligation of businesses to

pursue policies, make decisions, and follow actions that align with the broader objectives and values of society. This concept was further advanced by scholars like Archie B. Carroll (1979), who introduced the "CSR Pyramid", which highlights that businesses should meet economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. While CSR traditionally focuses on how companies should act responsibly, stakeholder theory takes this further by providing a structured approach to integrating these responsibilities into corporate decision-making processes. It emphasizes the intrinsic value of all stakeholders, encouraging businesses to consider their needs not only for instrumental reasons (e.g., enhancing reputation or profitability) but also for normative reasons—because it is ethically the right thing to do (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). This shift underscores the importance of integrating both ethical considerations and stakeholder interests into the core strategy of business operations.

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, introduced by John Elkington (1994), is another key concept underpinning responsible leadership. The TBL framework was influenced by both CSR and Stakeholder Theory. This framework expands the evaluation of corporate success to include social, environmental, and economic performance – “People, Planet, and Profit” (Elkington, 1994). In the context of responsible leadership, this means that leaders are expected to manage and report on the economic, social, and environmental impacts of their organizations, with an emphasis on ensuring that business practices contribute positively to all three dimensions (Maak & Pless, 2006). This aligns with the broader goals of sustainability and ethical stewardship (Caldwell et al., 2008). "If we understand the purpose of leadership in the context of stakeholder theory and the corporate responsibility debate, it seems more feasible to link it to both the concept of the ‘triple-bottom-line’ (Elkington, 1998) and the idea of sustainable development at large.” (Maak & Pless, 2006, p. 103). In line with this perspective, responsible leadership has been recognized as a crucial driver of TBL performance outcomes (Javed et al., 2020; Abraham, 2024). It promotes effective interaction among diverse stakeholder groups and seeks to align their often-conflicting interests, securing mutually beneficial outcomes and improving business performance.

A clear distinction must be made between TBL and ESG. Similar to TBL, ESG also focuses on three aspects: environmental, social, and governance. However, ESG treats governance as a non-financial factor, whereas TBL incorporates the economic dimension as a core financial component (Glorious-Dangelo, 2023; Abraham, 2024). While investors and financial institutions primarily use ESG to assess a company's sustainability and ethical practices, TBL

is designed for organizations that seek to integrate sustainability into their operations (Abraham, 2024).

Thus, responsible leadership evolved as a leadership style that integrates among others the principles of CSR, stakeholder theory, and TBL and prioritizes ethical commitment and the management of stakeholder relationships in a socially and environmentally responsible manner. Unlike traditional models like CSR, which focus on the organization, responsible leadership shifts the focus to the individual leaders within organizations, highlighting their crucial roles and responsibilities (Muff et al., 2020; Laasch, 2018). The practical implementation and acceptance of this leadership style depend heavily on the moral convictions of individual leaders and the broader corporate culture. Research indicates that CSR and ethical behavior cannot be fully achieved through formal structures alone. They require a fundamental shift in leaders' thinking and personal motivation (Pless, 2007; Pless & Maak, 2011; Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

2.3 Responsible Leadership in Germany

This chapter presents a brief overview of the German business landscape. The nuances of responsible leadership are deeply rooted in the country's cultural context, which prioritizes a stakeholder-oriented approach to business (Martin et al., 2009). This perspective is strongly influenced by the social market economy in Germany, a system that promotes cooperation between companies, employees, and the state (Resick et al., 2011; Charkham, 1995; Witt & Stahl, 2016). A central aspect of responsible leadership in Germany is the emphasis on collective orientation, reflecting the social market economy and the stakeholder model that governs German business practices (Resick et al., 2011; Charkham, 1995). Consensus and collaboration are highly valued, shaping how leadership is practiced and perceived in the German corporate environment (Resick et al., 2011). In addition, German business culture places great emphasis on integrity, trustworthiness, and the rigor of the decision-making process (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015). Organizational systems are expected to be designed to prevent unethical behavior, rather than relying solely on the integrity of individual leaders (van Luijk, 1990; Martin et al., 2009). This ethical orientation is reinforced by Germany's coordinated market economy, which encourages leaders to adopt long-term, sustainable strategies beyond short-term profit maximization (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Aguilera & Jackson, 2010; Witt & Stahl, 2016). German executives typically exhibit a strong sense of social responsibility, viewing their companies as entities with obligations beyond profit generation (Martin et al.,

2009; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Furthermore, the concept of "Wirtschaftsethik", emphasizing the ethics of relationships between economics and society, highlights the importance of social partnerships and positions corporations as social institutions (Ciulla, 1991; Martin et al., 2009). Hence, German business leaders prioritize not only economic success but also stable employment, social welfare, and innovation that benefits society (Martin et al., 2009; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). There is also a strong emphasis on compliance with legal and moral standards and a culture of accountability, consistent with Germany's preference for order and predictability in business practices (Resick et al., 2011; Hofstede, 1991).

Beyond that, institutional frameworks and regulations play a vital role in shaping responsible leadership (Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014). The German Corporate Governance Code (GCGC), a set of guidelines for good corporate governance of listed companies, emphasizes transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. It promotes the protection of stakeholder interests and encourages sustainable business practices (GCGC, 2022). Furthermore, recent legislation, like the German Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains (2021), underscores the legal obligations of companies to prevent human rights and environmental violations within their supply chains (BMZ, 2023). These regulatory frameworks and corporate governance create a baseline for responsible behavior as non-compliance can result in legal consequences and reputational damage (Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014; GCGC, 2022; Eisenbeiss et al., 2015). Under these conditions, a corporate culture that encourages responsible leadership is flourishing in Germany, driven by strong social expectations and institutional requirements.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview

The methodology for this work is based on the collection of primary data through surveys and semi-structured interviews. As outlined in section 1.2, the aim is to replicate the study conducted by the CRB at Católica Lisbon, maintaining the methodological framework of the original study, including similar survey instruments and interview protocols. However, this study extends the original scope by focusing on responsible leadership in the specific context of Germany. This expansion includes an adaptation of the methodology to account for cultural and organizational differences that may influence the perception and practice of responsible leadership in Germany.

3.2 Survey

3.2.1 Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis Technique

This section outlines the survey design, data collection methods, distribution, and data analysis techniques used in the study. The survey aims to collect qualitative data from a diverse range of participants, to investigate the perception of responsible leadership by identifying which leadership competencies are considered essential in Germany. Therefore, the original survey format used by the Portuguese study from CRB (2022) was adapted using Qualtrics and translated into German. The survey collected information from participants regarding their gender, age, nationality, academic background, tenure in their current organization and role, size of their organization, industry sector, and location (refer to Exhibit 1 for survey details). Initially, respondents were presented with an open-ended question to determine which leadership competencies they believed are crucial for addressing the challenges of today's world. Additionally, participants were requested to assess different characteristics of responsible leaders, ranking them in order of importance from highest to lowest, according to the CRB (2022) study. Respondents were then asked to indicate which areas of responsibility among different stakeholders they considered most relevant for businesses to address.

To maximize the diversity and representativeness of the sample the survey was distributed electronically via email, outreach through social networks such as LinkedIn, and utilizing word-of-mouth referrals. Additionally, the questionnaire was published on Prolific, an online platform with access to a large and diverse pool of participants, ensuring that the sample is more representative of German individuals in leadership positions. Prior to publishing the survey on Prolific, a selective participant pre-screening was conducted to identify suitable participants making sure that the data collected is from individuals who have the appropriate background and experience. The following pre-screening filters were applied: (a) German nationality, (b) current roles involving leadership, positions of power, or supervisory duties, and (c) fluency in the German language. In total, the responses were collected in one week. The survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel to assess central tendencies and identify common patterns and trends among the responses.

3.2.2 Sample Characterization

In the survey, 217 valid responses were collected from individuals in leadership positions across Germany. For this research, the sample size is sufficient, as the goal is to identify patterns and trends rather than to test specific hypotheses (Maxwell, 2000; Creswell, 2014).

Almost all respondents hold German nationality, with four participants indicating dual nationality. One respondent is of Swiss nationality. 74% percent of survey participants are male, while 26% are female (see Exhibit 2). The gender imbalance among survey respondents can be explained by the disproportionate number of men occupying leadership positions in Germany (Nett et al., 2022). According to data from the German Federal Statistical Office, as of 2023, only 28.7% of leadership roles in Germany were held by women (Destatis, 2023).

The largest group of respondents is between 25 and 35 years old and accounts for 46% of participants, followed by the 35-45 age group with 29%. The 45-65 age group represents 14% and the youngest group, 18-25 years, comprises 11%. None of the participants were aged 65 years or over as seen in Exhibit 3.

A total of 51% of respondents indicated that they are employed in organizations with more than 250 employees, while 21% are employed in organizations with 50 to 250 employees, as shown in Figure 2. Smaller organizations are less represented with 14% working in companies with 10 to 50 employees and 15% in companies with less than 10 employees.

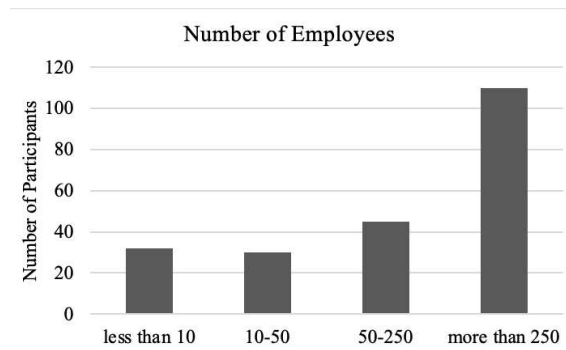


Figure 2: Number of Employees in the Organization

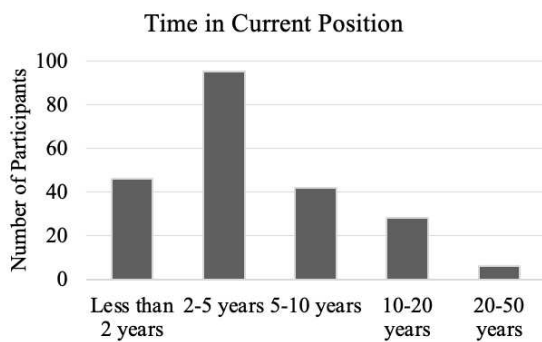


Figure 3: Time in Current Position

44% have been in their position for 2-5 years as presented in Figure 3. This is followed by 21% who have been in their position for less than 2 years. In addition, 19% have been in their position for 5-10 years, 13% for 10-20 years, and 3% have been in their position for 20-50 years.

The survey primarily reflects the information technology (IT) and services sectors, with 22% of respondents working in IT and 21% in services, indicating a strong focus on business services, consulting, and professional services as seen in Exhibit 4. The industrial sector, including manufacturing, accounts for 16% of respondents. Healthcare represents 11%, while financial services make up 7%. Other sectors, covering 29 distinct industries, account for 15%

The most frequently mentioned characteristics include empathy, communication, assertiveness, flexibility, adaptability, intelligence, expertise, honesty, foresight, and charisma.

In addition, the survey investigated which stakeholder groups respondents believe fall under the responsibility of responsible leaders. Specifically, it aimed to assess the extent to which respondents agree or disagree that a key aspect of responsible leadership is prioritizing the needs and well-being of all stakeholder groups within an organization. The purpose of this assessment was to determine whether current practices are consistent with the theoretical definition of responsible leadership as outlined in section 2.1, which underlines consideration of the interests of all stakeholders. Figure 5 illustrates the findings. The stakeholder groups are listed along the vertical axis, while the color-coded bars on the horizontal axis depict the distribution of responses, ranging from "Fully agree" to "Fully disagree". The results show a clear hierarchy in the perception of responsibility towards different stakeholders. Internal and closely related stakeholders, such as employees and customers, are considered the most important and enjoy the highest allocation of responsibility. There is also a strong consensus among respondents regarding responsibility towards future generations, the environment, investors and shareholders. However, opinions on responsibility towards local communities are more diverse, with a significant number of neutral or mixed views. A similar pattern is observed with stakeholder groups such as members of partner organizations, trade unions, and suppliers, who are assigned a moderate level of responsibility. However, there is also a significant degree of neutrality and even rejection among respondents, indicating a divergence of opinions in this area.

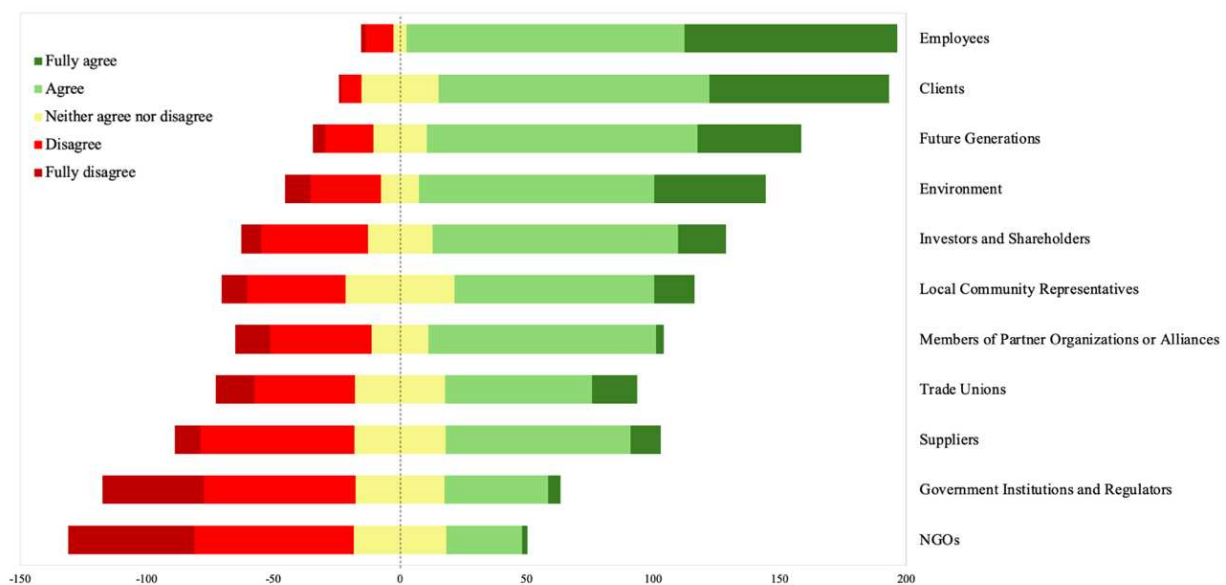


Figure 5: Different Stakeholders and the Perceived Responsibility for Them

External stakeholders, such as government institutions and regulators as well as NGOs, receive the least recognition in terms of responsibility, with a notable degree of rejection evident.

Lastly, the survey examined the characteristics of responsible leadership that are perceived as most important in Germany, intending to explore differences in perception in different cultural and contextual settings. Like in the original study conducted by the CRB (2022), participants were asked to rank thirteen characteristics that had been identified in the literature on responsible leadership. To minimize bias, the characteristics were displayed in a random order for each participant. The results, illustrated in Figure 6, show a clear prioritization of certain leadership qualities. In this funnel chart, the rankings for each characteristic were analyzed by calculating the average position (from 1 - most important, to 13 - least important) at which each trait was selected by participants, reflecting the relative importance as perceived by the participants. To visually represent the importance of each characteristic, these averages were inverted so that the most important characteristics appear at the top of the funnel, with less important ones following below. Finally, the characteristics were ranked based on these inverted averages, providing a visual summary of their meaningfulness.

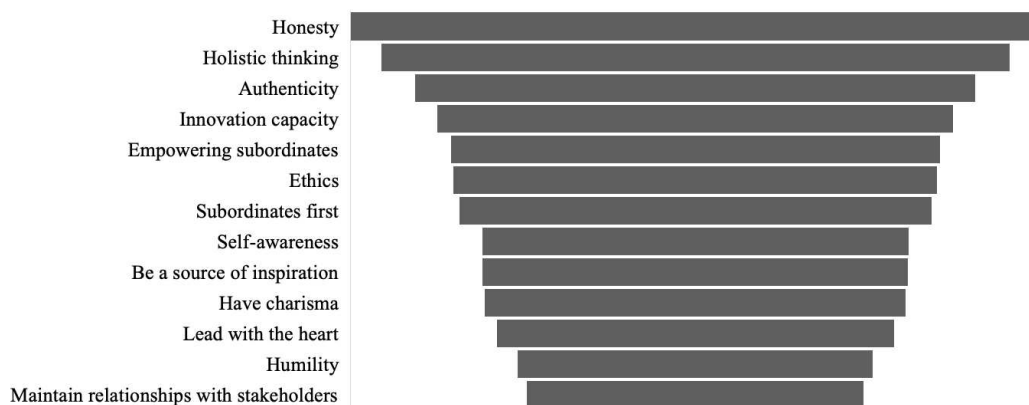


Figure 6: Characteristics for Responsible Leadership in Order of Importance

The survey identified *honesty* as the most important attribute of responsible leadership, followed by *holistic thinking* and *authenticity*. *Innovation capacity* and *empowering subordinates* also ranked highly, completing the top five traits. Mid-tier traits included *ethics*, *prioritizing subordinates*, and *self-awareness*. While traits such as *charisma*, *leading with heart*, *humility*, and *maintaining relationships with stakeholders* are valued, they were not prioritized as highly as the others.

It is important to note that the above survey results are subjected to further analysis through the medium of individual interviews, as detailed in section 3.3.1. This is to gain a more profound

understanding of the fundamental values and considerations that underpin the aforementioned leadership priorities. In chapter 4, all findings are compiled and critically examined.

3.2.4 Comparative Empirical Analysis

To deepen the understanding of the results analyzed in section 3.2.3, a comparison was made with a study conducted by the CRB at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics in 2022, as outlined in section 1.2 of this thesis. This comparative analysis explores how leadership characteristics are perceived and valued across three countries: Portugal, the United States, and Germany. In the Portuguese sample, the most valued characteristics included *honesty*, *ethics*, *humility*, *being a source of inspiration*, and *authenticity* (Exhibit 7). While there is considerable overlap with the characteristics valued in the German sample, the prominence of *humility* in Portugal suggests a cultural emphasis on modesty and the ability of leaders to remain grounded and approachable. The American sample valued *honesty*, *ethics*, *authenticity*, *empowering subordinates*, and *being a source of inspiration* as the most important traits of responsible leaders (Exhibit 7). Therefore, it shares several key characteristics with both the German and Portuguese samples, particularly in valuing *honesty*, *authenticity*, *ethics*, and *being a source of inspiration*. However, the American sample diverges from the Portuguese by placing greater importance on *empowering subordinates*, similar to the German sample. Notably, all three countries highlight a consensus on the attributes of *honesty*, *authenticity*, and *ethics*. In all three countries, *honesty* is ranked as the most valued characteristic of responsible leadership. *Authenticity* also ranks highly in all three countries, though its position varies slightly (third in Germany and the U.S., fifth in Portugal). *Ethics* is another top characteristic in both the USA and Portugal and is ranked second in both countries. While it is still highly valued in Germany, it ranks slightly lower, in sixth position. This difference suggests that moral integrity is valued differently in different cultural contexts, even though the importance of ethical standards as a central component of responsible leadership is widely recognized (Maak & Pless, 2006; Muff et al., 2020). The CRB (2022) further underlines that *ethics* is the only trait directly linked to responsible leadership theory, while *honesty* and *authenticity* are more aligned with authentic leadership. These findings will be further analyzed in chapter 4.1.

3.3 Individual Interviews

3.3.1 Research Design, Participant Selection, and Method

As previously mentioned, alongside the questionnaires, six semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to gain a more detailed understanding of responsible leadership

from the perspective of German business leaders. These interviews complement the results of the surveys by providing qualitative insights that surveys alone cannot capture (Morris, 2015; Creswell, 2014). While the surveys identify trends and general attitudes, the interviews address the differentiated experiences of leaders and the specific contextual factors that shape their views (Creswell, 2014; Sayrs, 1998). By uncovering the “why” and “how” behind the survey results, the interviews aim to offer a more complete picture of the dynamics involved in developing and implementing responsible leadership in Germany (Morris, 2015).

Interviews were scheduled over a defined period of two months. Existing contacts of the author and LinkedIn outreach were utilized to reach the interview participants. Introductions were obtained from mutually independent sources to minimize the inherent risk of sampling bias associated with this type of research (Patton, 2015). Importance was attached to having a diverse representation of German leaders, covering different genders, age groups, organizational sizes, and industries as presented in Table 1. The interviews, conducted in German, were held virtually through Zoom or Microsoft Teams and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated for analysis under the assumption that the data provided would not be attributed to specific individuals. Full transcripts are available in both German and English upon request.

Names Given to Interviewees	Industry	Gender of Interviewees	Time in Current Position	Organization Size (No. of Employees)
Alex	Aviation	Male	2-5 years	> 250
Laura	M&A/Tax	Female	2-5 years	> 250
Tobias	Automotive	Male	> 10 years	> 250
Jonas	Consulting	Male	1-2 years	10-50
Sophie	Tax	Female	5-10 years	> 250
Simon	Consulting	Male	2-5 years	> 250

Table 1: Interviewees Overview

Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the objectives, procedures, and confidentiality conditions of the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the interviews began. The interviewees then introduced themselves and described their roles in their respective companies. Using the detailed interview guide (see Exhibit 8), the interviewees then answered a series of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting their personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of responsible leadership (Creswell, 2014; Morris, 2015). The interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of the practices, challenges,

and benefits associated with responsible leadership. In addition, the conversations explored the role of training and coaching in promoting responsible leadership and identified the key steps required to further advance this leadership approach in Germany.

3.3.2 Thematic Data Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of the study, thematic analysis was used to identify themes and sub-themes from the interview contents, focusing on recurring patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The process comprised five phases, for an overview see Exhibit 9. The first phase was to familiarize with the data. To do this, the recorded video calls were rewatched, fully transcribed, and translated into English. The transcripts were then carefully read, key passages highlighted, and initial ideas and observations that were relevant to the research question were noted. In the second step, the data was coded by grouping the data segments into codes, so-called labels that highlight relevant key findings for the research questions. In the next step, similar codes were grouped to form broader themes and sub-themes that capture important patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In the fourth stage, these themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the data, with some themes being merged, split, or discarded as needed. Once the themes and sub-themes were finalized, they were defined and named, assuring that the titles clearly captured their essence and relevance to the research questions (see Exhibit 10 for an example). The outcomes of the thematic analysis are outlined in the forthcoming chapter.

3.3.3 Identified Themes and Sub-Themes

A total of five overarching themes and eleven subordinate themes were identified through the process of thematic analysis. For a concise overview, please refer to Exhibit 11.

I. Perception of Responsible Leadership

The first theme identified from the interviews revolves around the perception of responsible leadership, which is shaped by two key sub-themes. First, interviewees addressed the core leadership qualities like the need to balance business goals with employee well-being, focusing on fostering trust, authenticity, resilience, and empathy. Second, key actions and principles of responsible leaders were identified, including open communication, supporting professional growth, and promoting sustainability efforts while avoiding superficial practices.

i. Core Leadership Qualities

There was a strong consensus among interviewees that responsible leadership requires balancing employee well-being with business objectives. A responsible leader is expected to harmonize the achievement of organizational goals with the personal and professional growth of their subordinates. As Sophie and Alex noted, it's about ensuring business targets are met while addressing the individual needs of employees. A responsible leader should place value on short-term project deliverables and long-term strategic goals while supporting their teams, building team spirit, and setting an example through their actions (Sophie). Good communication skills, particularly in conflict management, were considered essential, as clear and transparent communication builds trust and fosters a culture where employees, even juniors, feel comfortable providing feedback (Sophie). Strategic thinking was considered another vital quality, where leaders are encouraged to move beyond day-to-day tasks and adopt a broader, more entrepreneurial perspective (Sophie). Jonas agreed that a responsible leader prioritizes good interpersonal relationships and team harmony over short-term financial gains. Simon extended this further, "responsible leadership also means that we take into account the holistic perspective of humanity, the environment, and social and political development". In addition, trust was underscored as a foundational characteristic of responsible leaders. Tobias and Sophie underlined that mutual trust between leaders and employees is essential, especially in remote working environments. "Trust is central to responsible leadership. Employees must feel the trust of their leader, and conversely, the leader must trust the employees" (Tobias). It was emphasized that leaders must balance trust and control, understanding that signaling trust often yields better results than implementing stringent controls. In addition, authenticity, and honesty were considered critical in building and maintaining trust (Tobias). Resilience and the ability to take decisive action during crises were also identified as core responsible leadership qualities. Jonas emphasized that self-reflection and self-management are the foundation for responsible leadership, "you can only be a responsible leader if you can reflect on yourself as a person and be able to lead yourself". Jonas and Simon pointed out that leaders must manage their egos, stress, and emotions to avoid negatively impacting their teams. Emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and empathy were highlighted as essential for creating a humane and supportive work environment (Simon). Laura agreed on this by underlining the importance of understanding and supporting employees through their mistakes and various life situations, fostering an open and empathetic workplace as a key responsibility of leaders.

ii. Key Actions and Principles of a Responsible Leader

Several key actions that define responsible leadership in Germany were expressed in the interviews. A common theme was the importance of clearly communicating and reinforcing the company's long-term strategy while maintaining an ethical attitude, particularly one supported by the founding or owner's family (Tobias). Furthermore, responsible leaders are expected to motivate employees, especially those facing challenges, by emphasizing strengths and providing continuous opportunities for professional development (Simon). This includes mentoring younger colleagues, guiding their long-term career growth, and fostering a culture of open, two-way feedback (Sophie, Laura). Accordingly, responsible leadership also involves being a role model, and demonstrating the behaviors and values leaders want to see in their teams, such as adaptability, openness to new ideas, and ethical conduct (Sophie). Jonas agreed that responsible leaders must create a work environment that supports work-life balance and employee well-being, offering benefits like wellness programs and fostering a supportive, inclusive culture. He further highlighted that transparent communication, especially about company finances and decision-making processes, are essential actions undertaken by responsible leaders to build trust and promote fairness within the organization. Environmental and social responsibility were also emphasized, with actions such as reducing unnecessary printing and business travel and engaging in CSR initiatives (Tobias, Jonas, Alex, Sophie). However, the analysis revealed varying opinions on the extent of a leader's responsibility for ESG issues, with some noting that the relevance of environmental responsibility can depend on the industry (Laura, Alex, Sophie). In this context concerns were expressed about the authenticity of environmental initiatives, highlighting the tension between actions driven by external regulations and those motivated by the genuine intrinsic ethical commitment of responsible leaders. The challenge of avoiding "greenwashing" and ensuring that sustainability efforts are truly integrated into daily operations was also underlined (Alex, Sophie, Laura). Moreover, Tobias stressed that responsible leaders are expected to respond swiftly and effectively to external crises like natural disasters (e.g. donations and social projects), demonstrating corporate agility and the duty of giving something back to society. Ultimately, the importance of fostering a "speak-up culture", where employees can report ethical concerns anonymously, was noted as a crucial aspect of responsible leadership.

II. Supportive Factors for Responsible Leadership

The second theme covers the conditions that facilitate responsible leadership in organizations. Interviewees mentioned two aspects: the importance of organizational structures including culture and values as well as continuous leadership development training.

i. Organizational Setup

The organizational structures including the company's culture and values play a crucial role in fostering responsible leadership. Within German organizations, the ethical component of responsible leadership is primarily addressed through mandatory online compliance and ethics trainings, with employees required to sign off on completion (Sophie, Laura, Alex, Tobias). While these programs are designed to uphold ethical standards, their effectiveness and authenticity were debated. Alex endorsed them as providing structural support for compliance. However, Tobias argues that their true value lies in the sincerity and commitment of leadership, "you can easily sign a paper like this, but whether you mean it will be seen over time". In addition, systems for monitoring compliance with ethical guidelines and reporting violations along with the critical role of ethics officers, were seen as instrumental in upholding ethical standards and ensuring compliance throughout the organization (Alex). Likewise, interviews highlighted that the presence of designated ethics officers and mechanisms like employee reporting channels, including whistleblower systems, are essential elements of these frameworks (Alex, Sophie). Another organizational structure that is considered a responsible practice is the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, such as the promotion of women in leadership roles (Tobias, Laura, Sophie). Beyond that, Tobias exemplified how organizational support systems can be crafted to embed responsible leadership within the corporate culture. This organization's "code" is deeply rooted in the core values of the founders, reflecting principles such as innovation, commitment, and responsibility. These values are not just organizational aspirations; they are a direct extension of the founders' personal beliefs and are woven into the fabric of the company's operations beginning with top-level management who serve as role models by embodying and practicing this "code" in their daily actions (Tobias). Alex also observed, that "these values and initiatives actively promote responsible behavior", recognizing the importance of such frameworks in embedding ethical conduct throughout the entire organization.

ii. Leadership Development

The interviewees indicated that in corporate cultures, a robust employee-centric approach is discernible, with companies integrating leadership development into their organizational missions and cultivating strategic competencies (Tobias). Sophie stated, "the more I involve my employees in training and provide them opportunities for external courses, the more I can rely on them". Mentorship programs and two-way feedback mechanisms were highlighted as critical components of responsible leadership development (Sophie, Alex). In large corporations, mentorship from seasoned leaders is particularly valued, helping mentees understand both formal and informal career practices (Alex). He noted, "it's great that this concept exists, and it's extremely helpful for me", underscoring the importance of mentorship in bridging the gap between formal training and real-world corporate dynamics. Some interviewees mentioned impactful programs that focus on self-awareness and emotional intelligence, which are essential for empathetic and responsible leadership (Jonas). Simon shared his experience with a program emphasizing meditation, self-reflection, and understanding human contexts, which he found empowering in his leadership journey. Female empowerment programs were also discussed, particularly those that support women in leadership roles, helping set boundaries and manage stress effectively. The interviewees collectively asserted that the assortment of training programs available is comprehensive and indispensable for the development of a responsible and empathetic leadership style. However, Sophie observed that since the pandemic (2020) a significant number of training sessions have transitioned to an online format. She emphasized that these sessions would be more effective if conducted in person, particularly for "soft" topics like leadership, where face-to-face interaction is crucial.

III. Challenges in Implementing Responsible Leadership

Although interviewees acknowledged the availability of various leadership and development programs within organizations, implementing responsible leadership is fraught with numerous hurdles. Leaders, particularly in fast-paced environments, often face competing priorities between operational demands and leadership responsibilities. This section outlines three key complications that emerged from the analysis: operational prioritization, cultural resistance, and external steering and market pressures. These factors create significant barriers to consistently practicing responsible leadership across organizations.

i. Operational Prioritization

A major obstacle identified in the interviews is the difficulty leaders face in managing time effectively, especially in fast-paced, project-driven environments like consulting (Simon, Sophie, Laura). Interviewees highlighted the tension between meeting immediate business needs and maintaining long-term employee engagement (Tobias, Alex). Sophie pointed out that time constraints often push "people" issues aside in favor of client work and financial outcomes. Despite the company's stated commitment to valuing people-related issues, these priorities frequently take a back seat, especially among some executives. This deprioritization reflects the difficulty of balancing business results with team well-being. Simon emphasized the challenge of balancing responsible leadership with corporate performance demands. He described the pressure leaders feel, where "even one-on-one meetings can become more about managing immediate tasks than addressing employee concerns". The perceived inefficiency of emotionally intelligent leadership practices, such as personal check-ins, in fast-paced business environments was also discussed. Simon noted that these practices, while valuable for creating a supportive work environment, are often viewed as time-consuming and non-productive, "it takes time asking 20 employees how they are in a meeting. You can't translate that into money, only into feelings". Another concern raised was the lack of time to reflect on and apply newly acquired skills from leadership training (Tobias). Tobias said that "executives often return to their hectic routines after training, leaving little room to implement what they have learned". Additionally, Svenja and Laura pointed out that limited budgets for training and development often restrict opportunities for employee growth. Despite the importance of fostering a collaborative environment, the pressure to meet project deadlines makes it challenging to provide timely feedback and support to employees (Laura). Jonas agreed by stressing that there are times when decisive, unilateral decisions are necessary, and finding the balance between these approaches is a key obstacle. All interviewees agreed that successful project completion remains the top priority, often at the expense of employee-centered, responsible leadership practices.

ii. Cultural Barriers

Interviewees also identified significant barriers to facilitating responsible leadership within organizations. Human resources processes and regulatory compliance were frequently cited as these are often associated with cumbersome administrative hurdles, especially in the case of organizational changes. Tobias explained that during critical project phases, the inability to

hire additional staff forces leaders to improvise and prioritize tasks within limited resources, increasing the burden on existing teams. Within this context, several interviewees called for more autonomy and fewer bureaucratic constraints in large companies to facilitate responsible leadership (Alex, Tobias). They commented that rigid internal processes, extensive regulatory requirements, and the involvement of works councils slow down decision-making and hinder the swift execution of organizational changes. Moreover, it was voiced that this delay frustrates leaders (Alex). Additionally, entrenched hierarchical structures within companies resist change, making it difficult to fully embrace responsible leadership practices (Jonas). Despite outward commitments to fostering a responsible leadership culture, deeply ingrained hierarchical mindsets persist, as Simon observed. The competitive nature of securing spots in training programs, especially in large corporations, further limits opportunities for skill development (Alex). Budget restrictions exacerbate this issue, making it difficult to financially reward employees even when their performance warrants it, as Tobias highlighted. Simon pointed out that companies often fear granting employees too much autonomy, as it could lead to the expression of unmet needs. This fear is rooted in hierarchical structures that stifle honest communication and emotionality. Jonas added that personal characteristics of leaders, such as impatience and perfectionism, can further hinder responsible leadership. Besides, Sophie raised concerns about the uneven distribution of people management responsibilities among executives, leading to inconsistencies in responsible management practices across the organization. Laura highlighted that many leaders feel inadequately prepared for their roles, particularly in dealing with employees. She argued that empathetic leaders often burden themselves with their employees' problems and struggle to set boundaries. Moreover, the lack of women in senior leadership positions, especially in men-dominated industries, reflects ongoing structural and cultural barriers. Ultimately, Tobias emphasized that establishing and maintaining a culture of responsibility within a company requires significant time, sustained effort, and commitment at all organizational levels, “it demands constant communication and reinforcement to ensure that the principles of responsible leadership are fully integrated and upheld”.

iii. External Steering and Market Pressures

The alignment between leadership practices and social expectations plays a critical role in supporting responsible leadership within German organizations. As noted by Tobias, Sophie, and Alex, the driving force behind responsible leadership often stems from external social

pressures rather than intrinsic motivations within a corporate culture. It was argued that responsible leaders face significant challenges due to the demanding nature of certain industries, particularly those with high environmental impacts, like automotive and aviation (Alex). These challenges are compounded by external regulations that dictate many responsible actions, limiting the flexibility of leaders to act proactively. As noted by Alex "a lot is done, but it is all dictated by external regulations rather than by initiatives from individual leaders". Tobias agreed, emphasizing that this regulatory-driven approach constrains leadership autonomy. For instance, it was discussed that initiatives surrounding diversity and inclusion are commonly implemented. However, they are sometimes perceived as superficial or not deeply integrated into the organizational ethos (Simon, Sophie, Alex). Additionally, some interviewees highlighted that these "responsible" initiatives frequently appear insincere due to their reliance on social expectations rather than genuine internal commitment (Sophie, Alex). Accordingly, the problem of a lack of authenticity and the perception of "value washing", where actions are seen as performative and not integrated into the corporate culture was raised (Sophie).

IV. Benefits of Responsible Leadership

This theme covers two main advantages of responsible leadership that appeared to be decisive among interviewees: increased employee engagement and retention, and long-term business performance, reputation, and social impact. These sub-themes illustrate the interviewees' belief that responsible leadership is important not only for an organization's internal dynamics but also for its external impact and sustained success.

i. Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention

The interviewees unanimously expressed that responsible leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing employee engagement and retention. They consistently described it as a critical factor in maintaining high levels of employee motivation and loyalty. By addressing both personal and professional needs, "responsible leadership helps in retaining top talent" (Tobias). Alex remarked that "failure to address these needs often leads employees to seek better opportunities elsewhere". He also insisted that "caring for employees is not only a moral duty but also a smart business strategy". Sophie supported this view by stating that employees appreciate being recognized as individuals, which naturally increases their satisfaction and desire to stay with the company. Laura further highlighted that "employees feel more comfortable, less fearful of making mistakes, and more committed to the company when they

work in an open and empathetic environment”. Positive team dynamics and a strong sense of cohesion were also identified as core benefits of responsible leadership (Jonas). The interviewees agreed that these factors are essential for both individual and collective success. Specifically, Alex added that “it is the only sustainable way to attract and retain top talent, as it builds a reputation for responsible leadership”. Moreover, Simon observed that empowering employees by giving them ownership of projects and autonomy in decision-making fosters personal responsibility and professional growth among employees.

ii. Long-term Business Performance, Reputation & Social Impact

Interviewees underlined the instrumental role of responsible leadership in sustaining the long-term success of a company, improving its reputation, and achieving a positive social impact. They acknowledged that responsible leadership strengthens external relationships, particularly through environmental stewardship and active community engagement (Tobias, Jonas, Alex). Alex pointed out that responsible leadership is “vital to avoid external sanctions and secure sustainable success”. He argued that responsible practices also serve as a strategic advantage that protects the company from potential legal problems and reputational damage. On the other hand, Tobias expounded that responsible leadership “increases the market value of a firm, attracts qualified personnel, improves credibility with customers, and enhances reputation in the capital market”. Jonas expanded on this view by recommending that long-term success should be measured by team harmony, which he sees as a decisive factor in the overall success of a company. The interviewees collectively consented that managing organizations with a focus on responsible leadership is the only viable path to achieving sustained success and making a meaningful impact in the long run.

V. Future Steps for Promoting Responsible Leadership

In analyzing the future steps required to develop responsible leadership, two important sub-themes emerged: structural and generational change. These sub-themes express the need for organizational restructuring and generational change to create an environment conducive to responsible leadership.

i. Structural Transformation

The interviews highlighted significant concerns regarding the current leadership selection process, where promotions are often based on expertise or certifications rather than vision, empathy, and soft skills. This approach has led to leaders lacking essential competencies for

effectively managing teams. Laura emphasized the negative impact of this, noting that fear-driven environments undermine openness and trust, “fear is something no one can thrive on”. She further stressed the importance of promoting individuals with a well-rounded skill set, not just those with impressive client bases or top figures, “if you want to bring someone into a leadership position, they also should have other qualities and not just a fantastic client base and top figures”. The interviewees advocated for a shift toward competency-based leadership, where roles are assigned based on demonstrated capabilities and relevant skills rather than tenure or previous achievements (Simon, Sophie, Laura). Laura emphasized the need for more women in leadership positions, citing empathy as a key trait that can enhance the work environment. She also pointed out the need for responsible leadership to address gender inequality by fostering an open and empathetic work environment where mistakes are met with understanding rather than punishment. She suggested introducing training and empowerment programs, such as the “Female Empowerment Programme”, to prepare women for leadership roles. Additionally, Laura emphasized the importance of flexible work models and better work-life balance to encourage more women to pursue leadership positions. The discussion extended beyond corporate structures, with Tobias underscoring the need for ethical leadership within the political sphere as a benchmark for corporate behavior. He expressed concerns about the erosion of trust due to unethical practices, particularly in politics, which he believes negatively affects social norms. He stressed the urgent need to implement responsible leadership approaches across all types of organizations. Moreover, Sophie called for a broader definition of leadership success that includes employee satisfaction and well-being, moving beyond mere financial metrics, “we need to get to a point where responsible behavior is incorporated into success, which isn’t just about the numbers being right”. She pleaded for greater accountability in leadership by proposing an “upward” feedback system where employees regularly provide feedback to their leaders. She also called for focusing evaluations on leadership qualities rather than just focusing on turnover and emphasized the importance of fostering a culture where transparency and learning from mistakes are encouraged.

ii. Generational Change

The interviews revealed a significant generational shift in leadership expectations, with criticism directed at traditional hierarchical structures. Participants expressed the need for a transition from autocratic leadership styles to more flexible and reflective models that prioritize empathy, openness, and employee well-being. Jonas emphasized the importance of dismantling

outdated patriarchal structures to make way for more inclusive leadership, stating, "the old school guys should leave now and bury their sometimes unreflected, outdated behavior and often autocratic style". It was highlighted that younger generations entering the workforce often encounter leadership cultures shaped by traditional approaches that don't align with their values (Simon, Sophie, Jonas). Simon emphasized the importance of involving young leaders in decision-making, as they are better positioned to drive the necessary cultural changes. He advocated for providing these young leaders with more opportunities to actively participate in corporate leadership, believing that their involvement is crucial for integrating fresh perspectives and innovative ideas. Interviewees shared the view that a generational shift is essential for advancing responsible leadership. By developing leaders who resonate with the values of newer generations, companies can cultivate a more harmonious and effective leadership environment that enhances the well-being and productivity of all employees (Simon, Sophie, Jonas).

4. Discussion

4.1 Research Findings and Main Conclusions

This section contrasts the results from the surveys, interviews, and literature review to address the research question. First, it was determined that in today's dynamic and interconnected world, responsible leadership is crucial to future business success. Interviewees consistently highlighted its strategic benefits, including improved employee engagement, retention, and long-term business performance. Additionally, responsible leadership was shown to enhance both organizational reputation and social impact, reinforcing the literature's assertion that ethical and sustainable practices are key contributors to long-term success (Voegtlin et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it became evident that there is a notable divergence between the conceptualization of responsible leadership and its operationalization in practice. Despite the promise of responsible leadership as a means of fostering sustainability and ethical conduct within organizations, several challenges and constraints should be taken into account.

The analysis of the survey and interview data provides a holistic outcome of what German business leaders consider essential for responsible leadership. Key traits such as *empathy*, *communication*, *assertiveness*, and *flexibility* were mentioned as crucial characteristics for overcoming the challenges of today's business landscape, reflecting the desire for a leadership style that is both relational and adaptable (Figure 4). *Empathy* is particularly emphasized as it allows leaders to understand and respond to the needs and perspectives of various stakeholders

(Voegtlin et al., 2020; Nakamura et al., 2022). Moreover, the interview data enriched this understanding by revealing a consensus among German leaders on the importance of *trust*, *communication*, and *resilience*. These qualities are seen as essential for overcoming modern business challenges, particularly in remote working environments (Tobias). The emphasis on *self-reflection* and *self-management* noted in the interviews suggests that responsible leadership in Germany begins with *self-leadership*, “managing one's own emotions and ego is critical to effectively leading others” (Jonas). This is in line with the theoretical view that the skills illustrated are necessary to build sustainable relationships with stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006; Muff et al., 2020). However, the survey also showed that next to *empathy*, *assertiveness* and *flexibility* were considered highly valued among respondents, indicating that executives are expected to find a balance between them. This outcome was confirmed by Jonas, indicating that while leaders are expected to be understanding and supportive, they must also make tough, sometimes unpopular decisions. This focus could be interpreted as an effect of the German corporate culture, which values structured decision-making but also recognizes the need for adaptability in a dynamic business environment (Meyer, 2014). At the same time, this paradox reflects the inherent struggle in modern leadership: balancing the softer, people-centered aspects of leadership with the hard-nosed, results-oriented demands of the business.

A deeper analysis of the survey results in section 3.2.3, which explores key traits of responsible leadership in Germany, shows a mix of qualities appreciated in both authentic and responsible leadership styles (CRB, 2022). Attributes like *honesty*, *authenticity*, and *empowering subordinates* (Figure 6) are central to authentic leadership, but only partially align with the responsible leadership framework presented in section 1.2, which prioritizes ethical integrity, stakeholder orientation, and systems thinking (Muff et al., 2020). While the recognition of *holistic thinking* (systems thinking) and *innovation capacity* reflects some alignment with responsible leadership, the relatively low emphasis on *stakeholder relations*, *ethics*, and *self-awareness* in the survey (Figure 6) indicates that these crucial competencies may be undervalued or seen as less significant compared to more traditional leadership qualities in the German context. This discrepancy illustrates potential misunderstandings or narrow interpretations of responsible leadership in practice. If competencies such as stakeholder engagement and self-awareness are not sufficiently prioritized, there is a risk that responsible leadership may be overly focused on internal organizational efficiency at the expense of broader social and ethical responsibilities.

Furthermore, cultural and contextual factors significantly influence the understanding and implementation of responsible leadership in Germany, particularly when compared to countries like Portugal and the United States as presented in section 3.2.4. In Germany, the meaningfulness of *holistic thinking* and *authenticity* reflects a leadership approach that integrates strategic foresight with relational integrity, aligning with the country's strong tradition of business ethics and social responsibility, as outlined in the literature review (Martin et al., 2009). Unlike in Portugal and the United States, where *ethics* might be more prominently highlighted as a standalone trait, ethical actions are systematically integrated into the strategic and relational aspects of leadership in German corporations (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015). The differentiated approach suggests that responsible leadership is viewed as a collaborative effort in Germany that involves the entire organizational structure and is rooted in collective social values (Martin et al., 2009). Rather than focusing on individual acts of integrity, German leadership practices focus on integrating ethics into decision-making processes and organizational culture, supported by formal ethics programs (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015; Alex; Sophie). This reflects the need for responsible leadership to be adaptable to the specific cultural and contextual factors of each country. While traits like *honesty*, *authenticity*, and *ethics* are universally valued, cultural differences influence their prioritization and shape leadership practices based on each country's unique social dynamics.

The stakeholder perspective outlined in the literature review is strongly supported by survey results and interviews, which underline the importance of balancing corporate goals with employee well-being as a responsible leader. The survey showed a clear hierarchy of perceived responsibilities, with employees and customers at the top, followed by future generations, the environment, and shareholders (Figure 5). This prioritization reflects a growing recognition that responsible leadership involves more than just short-term financial gains. It also includes sustainable practices like environmental well-being (Schröder et al., 2023; Abraham, 2024). However, the survey also indicates gaps in how respondents perceive their greater responsibilities, particularly regarding external stakeholders such as NGOs and government institutions (Figure 5). The low priority given to maintaining relationships with these groups (Figure 6) suggests a more internal focus, which contrasts with the literature's call for a holistic approach to responsible leadership including all stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006). This focus suggests that German leaders may see leadership responsibility mainly as an internal matter, aligning with ethical and relational leadership theories but overlooking the broader perspective of responsible leadership. The emphasis on internal stakeholders over external responsibilities

raises concerns about how responsible leadership is applied in practice. This finding was also evident in the most important leadership characteristics discussed earlier, reinforcing the tendency to prioritize internal relationships over broader stakeholder inclusiveness. This gap underlines the need for a clearer understanding and application of responsible leadership that includes both internal management and its broader impact on society.

To initiate the examination of the question "What factors facilitate responsible leadership's successful adoption and practice?" the interviewees identified several pivotal enablers that underpin the implementation of responsible leadership practices in Germany. Strong organizational structures, such as DEI initiatives, ethics training, ethics officers, and whistleblower systems, were recognized as crucial for promoting responsible values across organizations. Additionally, leadership development programs were emphasized, particularly those that focus on mentorship, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and empowering women in leadership roles (Laura, Alex, Simon, Jonas). Interviewees also recognized various ESG efforts, such as emission reductions, less business travel, and transparent compensation structures, as tangible outcomes of responsible leadership. The integration of these environmental and social initiatives, ethics training, and leadership development programs suggests that the TBL concept is increasingly being implemented within German organizations. However, the analysis highlighted significant disparities in how these initiatives are integrated across different industries. In highly regulated sectors like automotive and aviation, environmental initiatives are often shaped by government regulations and external mandates, leading to a structured but compliance-driven approach (Javed et al., 2021). This reliance on regulatory pressure can diminish the perceived authenticity of leadership's commitment to sustainability, making their efforts seem passive rather than genuinely proactive (Zhang et al., 2022). In contrast, industries such as tax and legal services, which are not subject to strict environmental regulations, have more flexibility in developing their sustainability strategies. Since their core activities have a minimal direct environmental impact, these sectors have more autonomy in shaping their sustainability (Laura). However, this freedom can lead to selective or limited implementation, often focusing on internal processes with little social impact (Sophie). Moreover, measuring success and responsibility in the context of responsible leadership remains a significant challenge. Traditional financial metrics are clearly defined and easy to track, but social and environmental responsibilities are often less tangible and more difficult to quantify (Abraham, 2024). Even with established concepts like the TBL, the assessment of "people" and "planet" remains subjective and dependent on contextual factors

(Elkington, 1998; Slaper & Hall, 2011). This subjectivity can lead to situations where organizations claim to act responsibly, but their actions are primarily aimed at enhancing their public image rather than being genuinely motivated by authentic values (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Maak et al., 2016). The risk of greenwashing, where companies exaggerate their environmental efforts, and value-washing, where social initiatives are overstated, is a recurring concern among the interviewees (Todaro & Torelli, 2024; Javed et al., 2021). These practices reiterate the gap between the theoretical ideals of responsible leadership and the practical realities of implementing these concepts within organizations as highlighted by interviewees. Particularly in Germany, where the stakeholder approach and the principle of the social market economy are strongly anchored, it is challenging to balance the needs and expectations of different interest groups (Witt & Stahl, 2016). A key conflict exists between the long-term focus on responsible practices and the short-term demands of financial performance (Sophie). While theory suggests that these two goals are reconcilable (Porter & Kramer, 2011), this research showed that there is a lack of resources, intrinsic motivation among executives and organizational barriers to fully bring these ideals into action. In a globally competitive market, external economic pressure, such as the need to compete internationally, can lead to a prioritization of short-term financial goals, making the implementation of responsible leadership more difficult (Jamali & Karam, 2018). These findings raise a critical question: Is the ideal of responsible leadership genuinely attainable in today's fast-paced, results-driven business environment? Can leaders effectively prioritize the well-being and interests of all stakeholders—including employees, customers, society, and the environment—when immediate business needs and short-term financial performance consistently take precedence?

4.2 Implications for Management Practices

To fully practice responsible leadership in the modern context, several aspects of management practice need to be enhanced. During the interviews, the following critical areas were identified as key focal points for driving the elaboration of responsible leadership in Germany:

1. Executives should consider restructuring organizational practices to grant more autonomy to employees and leaders (Tobias). Reducing bureaucratic constraints can empower leaders to make decisions that align with responsible leadership principles, fostering a more dynamic and responsive organizational environment.
2. There is a need to streamline and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy within organizations (Alex). By doing so, management can facilitate the implementation of responsible

leadership practices, allowing leaders to focus on long-term goals rather than being hindered by rigid structures.

3. Management must recognize and address the generational tensions between established leaders and young professionals (Jonas; Weeks & Schaffert, 2019). This might involve creating platforms for dialogue and collaboration between generations to harmonize traditional approaches with more progressive leadership styles, ensuring that leadership practices evolve in line with modern expectations.
4. Organizations must proactively support the transition to human-centered leadership that emphasizes empathy, vision, and soft skills (Simon). This requires offering training programs to develop these qualities and creating a workplace culture that values and encourages this leadership style.
5. To stay relevant and attractive to younger generations, organizations should critically assess and revise their traditional hierarchical structures (Jonas). Management should explore flatter, more inclusive organizational models that align with the preferences of younger leaders, who value flexibility, inclusivity, and empathy.
6. Organizations must ensure that their leadership rhetoric is fully aligned with actual practices (Sophie, Laura, Alex). To embed responsible leadership as a lived reality rather than a policy, there must be a consistent and cohesive effort across all organizational levels. This alignment is crucial to prevent disconnects between stated values and day-to-day operations, which can undermine trust and effectiveness.
7. For responsible leadership to take root, it requires unwavering commitment from key stakeholders, especially from top management (Tobias). The personal dedication of these leaders is instrumental to drive cultural change. Founders, in particular, play a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining the company's culture by exemplifying responsible leadership and integrating it into the organization's long-term vision (Eisenbeiss et al., 2015; Berson et al., 2007). Businesses must prioritize and actively support leadership initiatives that start at the top, ensuring that the principles of responsible leadership are deeply embedded throughout the organization. This top-down approach is essential for cultivating a culture where responsible leadership is not just an ideal but a tangible, everyday practice.

5. Limitations

It is important to note, that this study's methodologies including surveys and semi-structured interviews present several limitations. First, the survey sample is skewed towards large

organizations (51% of respondents), potentially biasing results towards corporate perspectives and underrepresenting smaller businesses or startups where leadership dynamics may differ. The sample is also predominantly male (74%), which may influence perceptions of leadership traits and responsibilities, potentially overlooking qualities and challenges more relevant to women. Additionally, most respondents are young (25–45 years old) with short tenures (2–5 years), limiting insights into how perceptions of responsible leadership evolve with age and experience. Certain sectors, particularly IT and services, are overrepresented, which may skew the results towards leadership qualities pertinent to these industries. In the interview component, the small sample size of six interviews limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of German executives. The use of self-reported data introduces the potential for social desirability bias, whereby participants may depict themselves more favorably than is accurate. Additionally, most interviewees work in large organizations, skewing the results and mostly leaving out the experiences of leaders in smaller businesses. Lastly, conducting the interviews in German introduces the potential for inaccuracies resulting from the translation process, which could affect data interpretation.

6. Conclusion

This research explored the characteristics of responsible leadership through a mixed-method approach, combining surveys and interviews to develop a comprehensive understanding of how German leaders perceive and implement these principles into practice. The findings show a clear hierarchy of traits that define responsible leadership in Germany, with *honesty*, *holistic thinking*, *authenticity*, *innovation capacity*, and *empowering subordinates* emerging as the most essential competencies.

However, the author's expectation that responsible leadership is deeply embedded in German corporate culture is challenged by a significant gap between theory and practice. Both the interviews and surveys revealed a misalignment in how responsible leadership is conceptualized and operationalized. While responsible leadership is increasingly seen as a strategic necessity, its practical application often falls short of the ideals promoted in academic literature and company rhetoric. German leaders tend to prioritize internal stakeholders, such as employees and customers, while giving less attention to external groups like NGOs and governmental institutions. This narrow focus conflicts with the broader stakeholder approach emphasized by responsible leadership theories, which advocate for balancing the interests of all stakeholders to achieve long-term sustainability and ethical alignment (Maak & Pless,

2006). This divergence can be attributed to multiple factors, including organizational resistance, regulatory pressures, and the inherent challenges of balancing short-term financial performance with long-term perspectives.

This dissertation offers a valuable contribution by uncovering the cultural and contextual factors that shape the understanding and practice of responsible leadership in Germany. In contrast to countries like Portugal and the United States, German leaders prioritize attributes such as *holistic thinking*, *authenticity*, and *innovation capacity*. These traits reflect not only the growing focus on sustainability but also the need to navigate Germany's stringent and evolving regulatory environment. This finding enriches existing research by demonstrating how responsible leadership adapts to different national cultures and organizational contexts, underlining the importance of local variations in leadership practices.

From a practical standpoint, the implications for management are clear. Companies must prioritize the development of responsible leadership competencies through targeted training, mentorship programs, and organizational restructuring. This will help leaders balance business imperatives with responsible practices. Organizations also need to address generational differences in leadership expectations by fostering dialogue and collaboration between traditional leaders and younger professionals, who value empathy, flexibility, and work-life balance. Adopting these shifts will position organizations to cultivate resilient, forward-thinking, and responsible leadership teams.

Looking ahead, future studies should further investigate the long-term outcomes of responsible leadership practices across different industries and cultural contexts. Particular attention should be paid to the integration of external stakeholders into leadership frameworks, as this remains a significant gap in German business practices. Additionally, future research should explore the tension between short-term profitability and long-term responsible practices, focusing on how companies can reconcile these competing demands. More empirical studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of specific management strategies to ingrain responsible leadership into corporate culture, ensuring these practices are not merely rhetorical, but genuinely practiced across all levels of the organization. Finally, future research should also examine the potential unintended consequences of responsible leadership, such as possible trade-offs between ethical decision-making and operational efficiency.

To thrive in an increasingly interconnected and scrutinized global marketplace, German companies must go beyond traditional business metrics. Leaders who integrate honesty, empathy, and holistic thinking into their decision-making processes will ensure long-term business success. This approach fosters psychological safety, trust, and credibility among employees, customers, and society. By embedding these principles into corporate culture, organizations will be better equipped to meet the expectations of future generations, creating corporations that are profitable and socially responsible. Ultimately, responsible leadership is not just a strategic advantage—it is a moral imperative for achieving sustainable and inclusive business growth in a rapidly changing world.

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Appendix

Exhibit 1: Survey Questionnaire (Qualtrics)

Start of the block: Introduction

Q1 Dear participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey, which is part of my Master's thesis at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics.

The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Participation is completely voluntary and your answers will remain anonymous and confidential.

This questionnaire has been developed to assess German society's understanding of responsible leadership and its key characteristics. It also aims to explore which stakeholders fall within the scope of responsibility of responsible leaders and whether there are differences in the perception of responsible leadership between German, Portuguese, and American leaders.

If you have any questions or need additional information about this survey, please feel free to contact me at s-dhaist@ucp.pt.

Thank you in advance for your time and valuable perspectives!

Yours sincerely,

Danièle Haist

End of the block: Introduction

Start of the block: Consent

Q0 This is a research study. Please select “I agree to participate” to participate in the study. Select “I do NOT consent to participate” to be excluded from the study.

- I agree to the participation (1)
- I do NOT agree to participate (2)

End of the block: Consent

Start of the block: Block 2: Characteristics of responsible leadership

Q1 What leadership skills do you consider essential for mastering the challenges of today's world?

Q2 Please rank the following characteristics in order of importance for responsible leadership (1 = most important, 13 = least important):

- _____ Honesty (1)
- _____ Ethics (2)
- _____ Authenticity (3)
- _____ Maintain relationships with stakeholders (4)
- _____ Empowering subordinates (5)
- _____ Innovation capacity (6)
- _____ Be a source of inspiration (7)
- _____ Subordinates first (8)
- _____ Self-awareness (9)
- _____ Holistic thinking (10)
- _____ Lead with the heart (11)
- _____ Have charisma (12)
- _____ Humility (13)

End of the block: Block 2: Characteristics of responsible leadership

Start of the block: Block 3: Perception of responsibility towards various stakeholders

Q3 Please rate how much you agree with the following statements. For each listed stakeholder group, select the level of responsibility you attribute to a responsible leader.

Q4 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of employees.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

Q5 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of suppliers.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

Q6 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of the environment.

- Fully disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Fully agree (5)
-

Q7 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of clients.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

Q8 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of investors/shareholders.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

Q9 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of trade unions.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

Q10 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of future generations.

- Fully disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Fully agree (5)
-

Q11 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of government institutions and regulators.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

Q12 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- Fully disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Fully agree (5)
-

Q13 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of members of partner organizations or alliances.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

Q14 A responsible leader should prioritize the interests and well-being of local community representatives.

- Fully disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Fully agree (5)

End of the block: Block 3: Perception of responsibility towards various stakeholders

Start of the block: Block 4: Employment Details

Q15 How many employees work in your organization?

- less than 10 (1)
 - 10-50 (2)
 - 50-250 (3)
 - more than 250 (4)
-

Q16 Please mark "Correct" here.

- False (1)
- Neither right nor wrong (2)
- Correct (3)

Q17 In which sector do you work?

- Healthcare (1)
- Services (2)
- Consumer goods (3)
- Energy (4)
- Finances (5)
- Industry (6)
- Information Technology (7)
- Transportation (8)
- Other (9) _____

Q18 How long have you been in your current position?

- less than 2 years (1)
- 2-5 years (2)
- 5-10 years (3)
- 10-20 years (4)
- 20-50 years (5)

End of the block: Block 4: Employment Details

Start of the block: Block 5: Demographic Information

Q19 What is your age group?

- 18-25 (1)
- 25-35 (2)
- 35-45 (3)
- 45-65 (4)
- Over 65 (5)

Q20 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary/third sex (3)
- Not specified (4)

Q21 What is your nationality?

- German (1)
- Other (2) _____

Q22 In which region of Germany do you work?

▼ Baden-Württemberg (1) ... Thuringia (16)

Q23 What is your highest level of academic qualification?

▼ Abitur (1) ... Doctorate (doctoral degree) (8)

End of the block: Block 5: Demographic Information

Exhibit 2: Gender of Survey Respondents

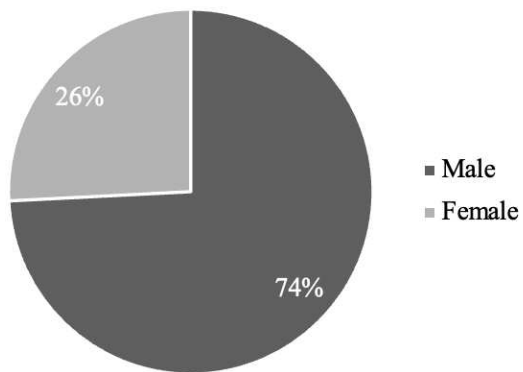


Exhibit 3: Age Groups of Survey Respondents

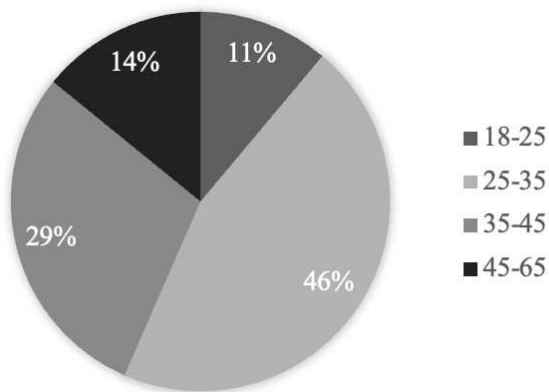


Exhibit 4: Sectors of Survey Respondents

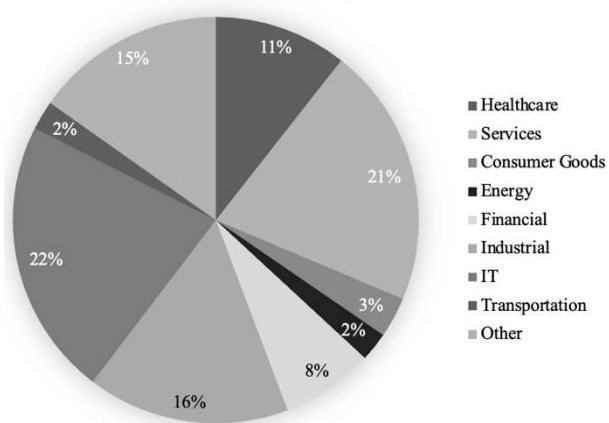


Exhibit 5: Highest Education of Survey Respondents

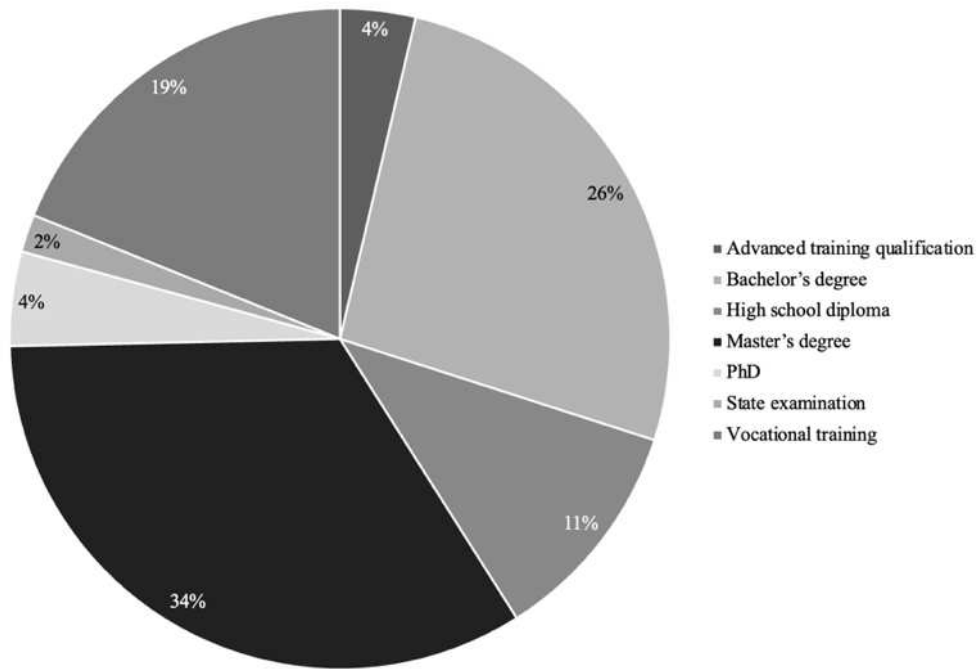


Exhibit 6: Region of Employment of Survey Respondents

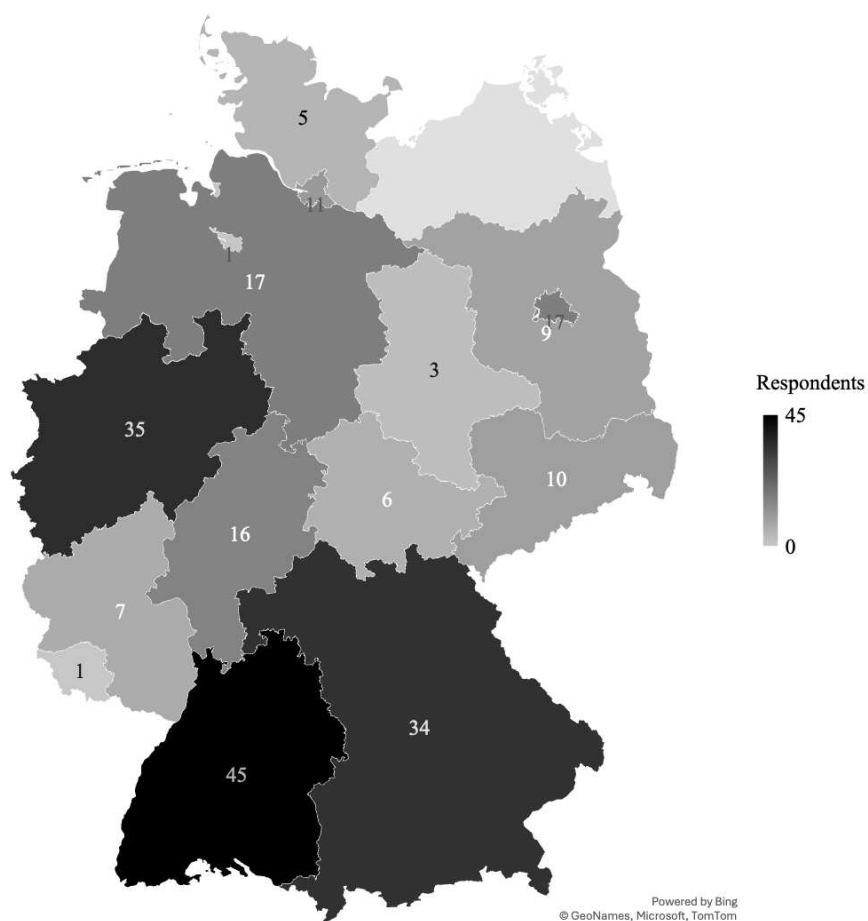
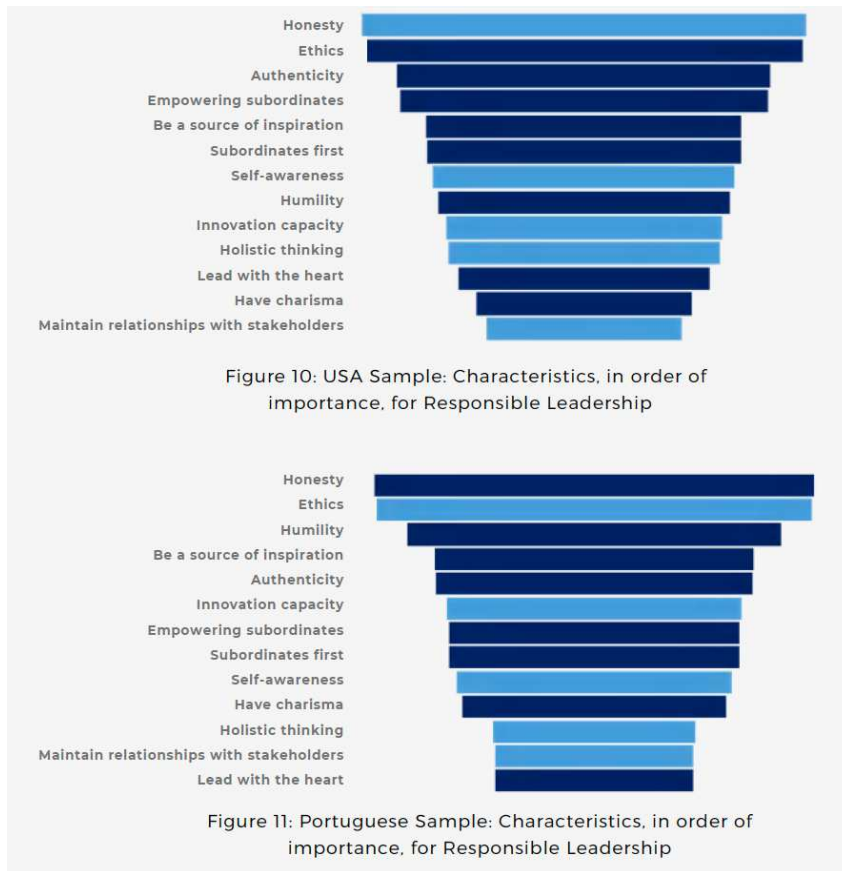


Exhibit 7: Comparison of Characteristics, in order of importance, for responsible leadership



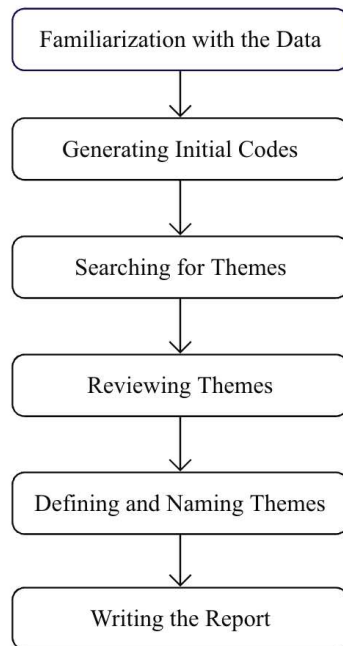
Source: CRB Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics (2022).

Exhibit 8: Interview Guide

- I. What does it mean to you to be a responsible leader? Can you give examples?
- II. In your daily life, what kind of barriers do you face when trying to practice actions that are considered responsible?
- III. In your daily life, what kind of enablers do you encounter when trying to practice actions considered responsible?
- IV. Considering the training you have participated in, both personally and professionally, what competencies were you trying to develop? Do you feel you have the preparation to take on the role of responsible leader?
- V. What are the benefits for a company whose leaders practice this leadership style?
- VI. In your opinion, what are the next steps for advancing responsible leadership practices within German organizations and the economy?

Source: Author’s extension based on CRB (2022).

Exhibit 9: Overview Thematic Analysis Process



Source: Author's illustration based on Braun & Clarke (2012).

Exhibit 10: Example of Identifying Themes and Sub-themes in the Thematic Analysis

Highlighted Quote from Interview Transcript	Code	Sub-Theme	Theme
You are not in fear mode but automatically more creative, which leads to better ideas and quality (Jonas)	Removing fear enhances creativity and productivity	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
An open and empathetic leadership style ensures that employees are happy to stay and are not afraid (Laura)	Open and empathetic leadership reduces employee turnover	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Open communication ensures that employees stay longer (Laura)	Open communication leads to longer employee retention	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Employees are happy to return or stay because they appreciate the company culture (Sophie)	Positive company culture encourages employees to return and stay	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Employees quickly take responsibility, which promotes their development (Simon)	Responsibility fosters employee development	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Companies that act responsibly have a higher employee retention rate (Tobias)	Responsible companies have higher employee retention	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Fear-free communication and empathy create a positive work environment (Laura)	Fear-free communication and empathy create a positive work environment	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Employees develop self-confidence, which leads to higher motivation and retention (Sophie)	Self-confidence boosts employee motivation and retention	Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Responsible leadership increases the market value and reputation of the company (Tobias)	Responsible leadership increases market value and reputation	Long-term Business Performance, Reputation, & Social Impact	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Responsible companies are more attractive in a competitive labor market (Tobias)	Responsible companies are more attractive in a competitive labor market	Long-term Business Performance, Reputation, & Social Impact	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Responsible leadership protects against sanctions and creates social value (Alex)	Responsible leadership protects against sanctions and creates social value	Long-term Business Performance, Reputation, & Social Impact	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Employees choose companies with good leadership, which improves reputation (Tobias)	Good leadership improves company reputation	Long-term Business Performance, Reputation, & Social Impact	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Reputation and credibility benefit from ethical behavior (Tobias)	Ethical behavior enhances reputation and credibility	Long-term Business Performance, Reputation, & Social Impact	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Responsible practices help attract talent and investors (Alex)	Responsible practices attract talent and investors	Long-term Business Performance, Reputation, & Social Impact	Benefits of Responsible Leadership
Leaders who act responsibly prevent legal problems and promote success (Alex)	Responsible leadership prevents legal issues and promotes success	Long-term Business Performance, Reputation, & Social Impact	Benefits of Responsible Leadership

Exhibit 11: Identified Themes and Sub-themes

- 1) Perception of Responsible Leadership**
 - Subtheme 1: Core Leadership Qualities
 - Subtheme 2: Key Actions and Principles of a Responsible Leader
- 2) Supportive Factors for Responsible Leadership**
 - Subtheme 1: Organizational Setup
 - Subtheme 2: Leadership Development
- 3) Challenges in Implementing Responsible Leadership**
 - Subtheme 1: Operational Prioritization
 - Subtheme 2: Cultural Resistance
 - Subtheme 3: External Steering and Market Pressures
- 4) Benefits of Responsible Leadership**
 - Subtheme 1: Enhanced Employee Engagement & Retention
 - Subtheme 2: Long-term Performance, Reputation & Social Impact
- 5) Future Steps for Promoting Responsible Leadership**
 - Subtheme 1: Structural Transformation
 - Subtheme 2: Generational Change