

Responsible Leadership in Organisations (2000–2025): A PRISMA-Guided Systematic Review of Definitions, Theories, Trends, and Research Gaps

Werner Koen  and Anton Grobler * 

Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa, Midrand 1686, South Africa; wernerkoen@yahoo.com

* Correspondence: grobla@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

As background to this study, organisational leadership has faced scrutiny due to ethical failures, governance crises, and global challenges, highlighting the limitations of models focused on short-term gains, specifically over the past two decades. This study, as a systematic literature review, aims to synthesise definitions, theoretical drivers, and research gaps in Responsible Leadership (RL) within organisational contexts, addressing conceptual fragmentation and the need for culturally diverse exploration, particularly in the underrepresented non-Western regions. The study employed a PRISMA-based approach to conduct a structured literature review on 67 peer-reviewed articles from 2000 to June 2025, sourced from 12 databases using Boolean searches. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies on RL in organisational settings; data extraction covered metadata, paradigms, methods, and outcomes, with narrative and quantitative synthesis applied. One of the major findings is that RL is a multidimensional, relational construct rooted in Stakeholder Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility, and the Triple Bottom Line, emphasising ethics, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability. Inconsistencies in definitions and measurements persist, with limited research in non-Western contexts and a need for standardised tools. The value of this study is in the consolidation of RL scholarship, highlighting trends and gaps (e.g., Global South underrepresentation), and proposes a research agenda for culturally responsive frameworks, offering value for theory refinement and practical leadership development in diverse settings. This systematic literature review was conducted and reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Keywords: responsible leadership; Stakeholder Theory; Triple Bottom Line; Corporate Social Responsibility; systematic literature review; measurement; ethical leadership



Received: 9 December 2025

Revised: 13 January 2026

Accepted: 20 January 2026

Published: 17 March 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and

conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, persistent ethical scandals, governance crises, and global socio-environmental challenges have eroded trust in organisational leadership, exposing the limitations of short-term, performance-driven models (Pless, 2023; Waldman & Balven, 2014). In response, responsible leadership (RL) has emerged as a paradigm that integrates ethical responsibility, stakeholder inclusivity, and sustainable development, positioning leaders as stewards of financial, social, human, and environmental capital (Pless & Maak, 2011; Doh & Quigley, 2014).

Distinct from traditional leader–follower-focused theories, RL emphasises relational accountability and multi-stakeholder engagement, encompassing employees, communities,

investors, regulators, and future generations. Since its conceptualisation in the early 2000s, RL scholarship has progressed from normative foundations to empirical operationalisation across sectors (J. J. de Klerk & Jooste, 2023; Lin et al., 2024). Yet the field remains fragmented, with ongoing debates over definitional boundaries, overlaps with ethical, authentic, servant, and transformational leadership, and limited generalisability beyond Western contexts (Haque et al., 2025; Witt & Stahl, 2016).

Despite growing scholarly attention, limited comprehensive PRISMA-guided systematic synthesis currently maps the evolution, theoretical integration, and empirical validation of RL over the past two decades. Existing reviews, such as M. de Klerk (2024), have offered narrative or region-specific reflections on RL but have not followed a transparent or replicable protocol. Consequently, there remains a lack of methodological coherence and clarity regarding how RL definitions, conceptual models, and empirical measures have developed across global contexts. This systematic review directly addresses this gap by applying a PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021) to ensure analytical rigour, reproducibility, and transparency in the synthesis of RL literature between 2000 and 2025.

Building on earlier conceptual syntheses such as M. de Klerk (2024) and Maak and Pless (2006), which primarily examined RL within limited theoretical or regional frames, this review uniquely consolidates both conceptual and empirical research globally. It systematically identifies definitional convergence, theoretical trajectories, and gaps in measurement and contextual representation, thereby advancing RL scholarship beyond prior descriptive or narrative accounts.

The inclusion of South Africa within this introduction serves to illustrate one of several emerging contexts where RL remains under-conceptualised and empirically underrepresented. While this review is global in scope, South Africa exemplifies broader conditions prevalent across the Global South, marked by socio-economic inequality, historical legacies, and deficits of institutional trust, that underscore the necessity of extending RL frameworks beyond Western-centric paradigms (Voegtlin & Scherer, 2017; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Koen, 2025). The South African example is therefore used not as a focal case but as an illustrative lens through which the study highlights persistent global gaps in RL conceptualisation and measurement across diverse organisational settings.

The overarching aim of this PRISMA-guided systematic literature review is to critically synthesise and consolidate the fragmented body of research on RL in organisational contexts from 2000 to 2025, by mapping key definitions, theoretical foundations, empirical trends, and research gaps, in order to address conceptual fragmentation and provide a robust foundation for future theoretical, empirical, and culturally diverse research and practice. In doing so, the review not only consolidates two decades of RL scholarship but also introduces a structured analytical framework to guide future research on responsible leadership as an emerging, measurable construct. This framework is grounded in the methodological rigour and conceptual foundations established in Koen (2025), ensuring that the synthesis is both theoretically coherent and empirically verifiable.

The review process was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 Expanded Statement (Page et al., 2021) to ensure methodological transparency and replicability (see Appendix B for the reporting checklist).

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it offers a consolidated and critically informed mapping of RL scholarship, resolving definitional ambiguities and elucidating theoretical intersections. Second, it assesses prevailing methodological approaches and challenges in RL research, providing recommendations for enhancing empirical rigour. Third, it adopts a contextual perspective by underscoring the imperative for culturally attuned and geographically inclusive studies. Accordingly, this review addresses international imperatives for leadership frameworks that are ethically robust, stakeholder-oriented,

and equipped to confront the multifaceted systemic challenges confronting contemporary organisations and societies.

2. Theoretical Framework

RL is anchored in foundational theories that foreground ethical, relational, and sustainable leadership dimensions. Central among these, according to Freeman (1984, 2010), is Stakeholder Theory (ST), which mandates leaders to equilibrate diverse stakeholder interests beyond mere shareholders, thereby cultivating accountability and enduring value (Hargrave & Smith, 2025; Valentinov, 2024). This framework resonates deeply with RL's relational ethos, casting leaders as stewards of multifaceted constituencies.

In the context of this systematic review, Stakeholder Theory provides the normative foundation of the analytical lens, clarifying why RL is examined through relationships of accountability and ethical reciprocity among multiple stakeholder groups. It guides the selection and interpretation of studies that conceptualise leadership not only as influence or performance but as the balancing of diverse, and sometimes competing, stakeholder interests (Freeman, 1984, 2010).

This stakeholder-oriented foundation finds its clearest and most concrete expression in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Serving as both a precursor and an outcome of RL, CSR translates stakeholder thinking into concrete organisational practice by embedding ethical obligations into the firm's day-to-day behaviour and structures (Maak, 2007; Maak & Pless, 2006; Matten & Moon, 2008). Thus, while ST provides the normative and strategic rationale for RL, CSR acts as the operational bridge that institutionalises these principles, creating a virtuous cycle between responsible leadership and sustained stakeholder value creation. RL further amplifies CSR by enforcing societal impact accountability, yielding enhanced legitimacy and trust (Amir et al., 2022; Zada et al., 2025).

Within this review, CSR functions as the operational framework through which responsible leadership is observed in practice. CSR links the ethical intent embedded in leadership theory to observable organisational behaviours, such as governance mechanisms, stakeholder reporting, and sustainability programs, making it an essential lens for evaluating how RL principles are enacted within empirical studies (Maak & Pless, 2006; Matten & Moon, 2008).

This integrative dynamic reaches its fullest conceptual and practical articulation in the Triple Bottom Line (3BL) paradigm (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999), which fuses economic, social, and environmental imperatives and positions responsible leadership as the linchpin for holistic sustainability. By operationalising the people, planet, and profit framework, 3BL transforms CSR from isolated initiatives into a coherent strategy that (i) harmonises profitability with (ii) social equity, mitigating disparities and fostering inclusivity (Maitlo et al., 2023) and (iii) environmental guardianship (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Abraham, 2024). In this way, RL, grounded in stakeholder obligations and enacted through CSR, finds its ultimate metric and guiding compass in the 3BL, ensuring that value creation is simultaneously sustainable, equitable, and enduring. The 3BL therefore represents the evaluative framework underpinning this review. It offers measurable dimensions; economic, social, and environmental, through which the outcomes and impacts of RL can be systematically compared across studies. The inclusion of the 3BL framework ensures that this review assesses RL not only as a conceptual construct but as a model with tangible performance and sustainability indicators (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018).

Collectively, these three frameworks form the conceptual architecture of the review: Stakeholder Theory defines why responsible leadership matters (normative foundation), CSR explains how it is enacted in organisational settings (operational mechanism), and the 3BL identifies what outcomes define its societal impact (evaluative dimension). These theoretical frameworks collectively delineate the ethical core of RL, distinguishing it from ethical

or transformational leadership through its emphasis on multi-stakeholder engagement and sustained societal impact (Voegtlin, 2011, 2016; Waldman & Balven, 2014). Nevertheless, persistent conceptual overlaps and definitional ambiguities necessitate rigorous theoretical refinement to ensure contextual applicability.

3. Materials and Methods

This review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), ensuring systematic and transparent reporting of each review phase. A full reporting checklist is provided in Appendix B. This investigation utilised systematic literature review methodology to examine the definitions, conceptualisations, and empirical examinations of RL within organisational contexts. A rigorous, replicable protocol was implemented, aligned with established systematic review guidelines (Higgins et al., 2019; Page et al., 2021), while incorporating adaptations to accommodate the dynamic evolution of leadership theory and its variegated application across diverse organisational settings.

3.1. Data Collection Process

3.1.1. Search Strategy and Database Selection

A comprehensive literature search was executed across 12 multidisciplinary academic databases to maximize coverage and incorporate diverse scholarly perspectives. The databases encompassed Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Journals, SAGE Journals, SA ePublications, EBSCOhost, IEEE Xplore, and ProQuest covering the period January 2000 to June 2025. The search was conducted by the first author and independently verified to ensure consistency and completeness across databases. The search strategy leveraged Boolean operators, integrating keywords and synonyms pertinent to RL (Booth et al., 2021). The final search terms included: RL OR responsible management, Ethical leadership AND responsibility, Responsible leading, Transformational leadership AND responsibility, Leadership accountability in organisations, CSR, Sustainable leadership practices, Inclusive leadership, Stakeholder engagement AND RL. Additional details on the search strategy are presented in Appendix C (Table A6). The search strategy and Boolean combinations were recorded and can be provided upon request for reproducibility. This systematic search strategy was conducted in alignment with PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The search and screening processes align with PRISMA 2020 items 5–9 (see Appendix B).

To ensure conceptual comparability and comprehensive coverage, additional constructs conceptually linked to RL, such as servant leadership, authentic leadership, and ethical leadership, were incorporated as secondary search terms. This inclusion aligns with prior research identifying definitional and theoretical intersections among these leadership paradigms (Haque et al., 2025; Maak & Pless, 2006; Dinh et al., 2014).

This systematic query generated 9374 records across all platforms. The inclusion criteria were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English from January 2000 to June 2025. This approach aligns with established best practices for systematic literature reviews (Page et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2022). The inclusion of keywords related to CSR and sustainability was theoretically grounded in the frameworks outlined in Section 2. CSR operationalises stakeholder obligations, while sustainability and the 3BL paradigms represent the evaluative dimensions of RL outcomes (Maak & Pless, 2006; Elkington & Rowlands, 1999; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Their presence in the search strategy therefore ensures conceptual alignment between the theoretical background and methodological design of this review.

3.1.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To uphold relevance and methodological rigor, the following inclusion criteria were applied: (i) articles must be peer-reviewed and published in scholarly journals; (ii) the primary focus must pertain to RL or cognate constructs within organisational contexts; (iii) RL or related terminology must appear in the title, abstract, keywords, or body text, and (iv) both empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) and theoretical contributions were deemed eligible.

In contrast, exclusion criteria encompassed the following: (i) studies centered exclusively on political, religious, community, civil, or military leadership; (ii) non-peer-reviewed outputs (e.g., editorials, book reviews, or conference proceedings), and (iii) work lacking substantive engagement with RL or stakeholder-oriented frameworks.

Article screening and selection were guided by a systematic review decision tree (presented in Figure 1), in accordance with established protocols (Snyder, 2024; J. J. de Klerk & Jooste, 2023).

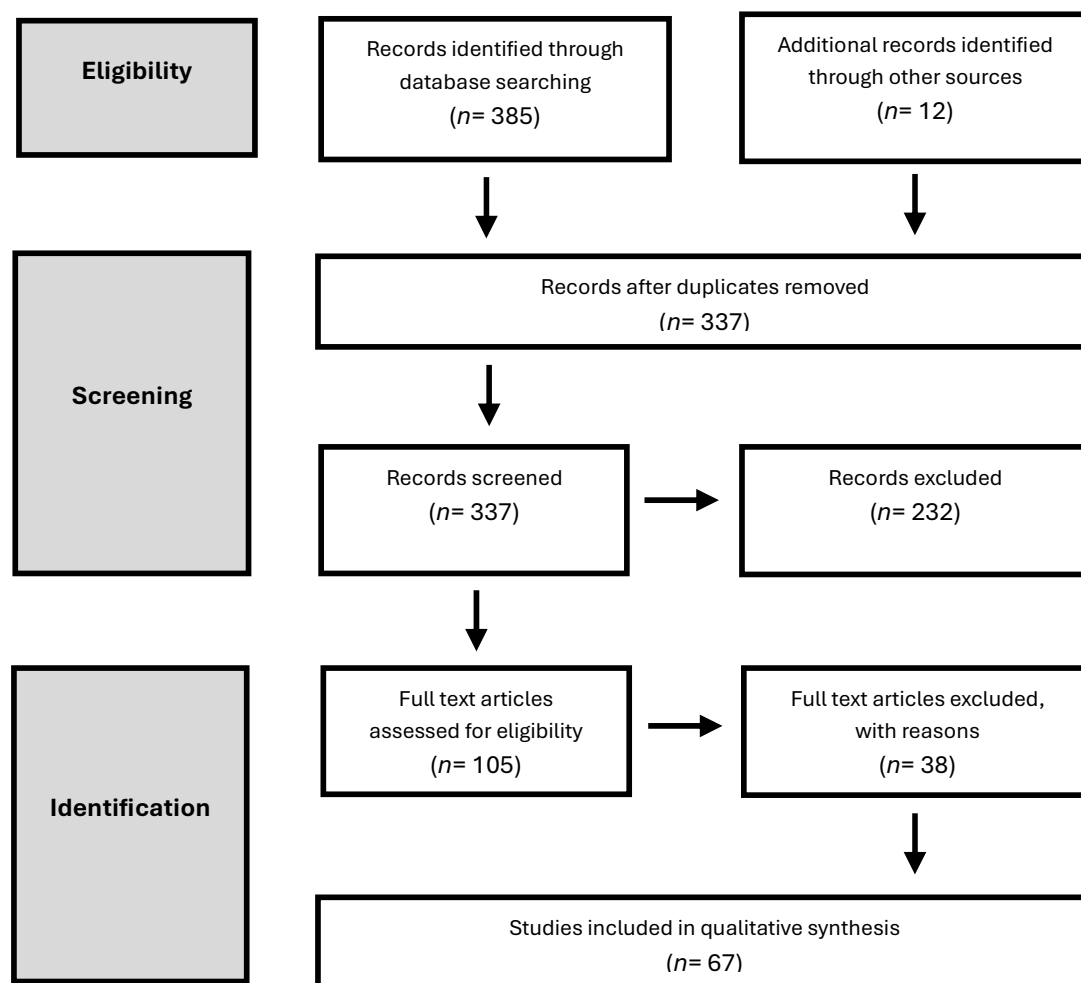


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (see Appendix B for checklist correspondence).

The PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the five phases of this literature review is presented below. Initially, 385 records were identified through database searches. After removing 60 duplicates, 337 records remained for screening. Of these, 232 were excluded based on relevance, quality, accessibility, study design, or scope. A further 38 full-text articles were assessed and excluded as they did not fully meet the review's inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 67 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1)

transparently outlines the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion processes used in this review.

The systematic review process was rigorously conducted according to clearly defined inclusion/exclusion criteria, in full alignment with established standards for systematic literature reviews in the fields of management and leadership. This approach enhances transparency, ensures replicability, and minimizes selection bias (Shaheen et al., 2023; Rademaker et al., 2025). These criteria were developed a priori and consistently applied during screening. The rationale for excluding grey literature, non-English studies, and non-organisational contexts was to ensure quality, comparability, and relevance to organisational leadership research.

3.1.3. Study Selection Procedure

The PRISMA flow diagram (decision tree) as depicted in Figure 1 was employed to facilitate the selection process, ensuring systematic and transparent screening. It served as a visual aid for navigating the inclusion and exclusion phases, enabling comprehensive evaluation of relevant literature (Snyder, 2024; J. J. de Klerk & Jooste, 2023), and inclusion in line with PRISMA items 16a–16b (Appendix B). As depicted in Figure 1, the five-phase PRISMA process encompassed identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. A tabulated summary of the screening stages is available in Appendix C (Table A7).

Articles satisfying core inclusion criteria yet exhibiting definitional or conceptual ambiguity underwent additional scrutiny and were subsequently categorised into nine thematic clusters based on conceptual overlap: Participatory leadership, Transformational leadership, Servant leadership, Management research in Africa, Sustainable development, Human resource management, Value systems, Ethical challenges, and Stakeholder-centric leadership.

All titles and abstracts were screened by the first author, with inclusion decisions cross-verified against PRISMA 2020 recommendations. The process is fully illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

3.1.4. Data Extraction and Coding

To promote consistency, transparency, and analytical rigor in the review process, a structured data extraction process was devised, consistent with established best practices in systematic literature reviews (Snyder, 2019; Kraus et al., 2020; Paul et al., 2021). This process facilitated the systematic capture and categorisation of key article attributes, thereby enabling comparability and synthesis across heterogeneous studies. The extraction process comprised the following fields: (i) developmental trajectory of RL as construct; (ii) article metadata: author(s), publication year, journal, and country of origin; (iii) study purpose: designation as conceptual/theoretical or empirical; (iv) methodological design: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods; (v) research paradigm: underlying epistemological orientation (e.g., positivist, interpretivist, critical); (vi) sample details: type, size, and contextual setting.

The final dataset consisted of 67 peer-reviewed journal articles, retained following full-text evaluation and rigorous validation against the stipulated inclusion and exclusion criteria. Each article underwent systematic coding, with extracted data aggregated and structured accordingly. Data extraction was conducted using a structured coding matrix. No formal risk-of-bias assessment tool was used due to the conceptual and methodological heterogeneity of studies; instead, each article's design and quality were narratively appraised (Higgins et al., 2019). Consistent with Snyder (2019), the review integrated narrative synthesis to elucidate conceptual trajectories and quantitative categorisation to delineate temporal trends and methodological distributions. This hybrid methodology, aligned with Kraus et al. (2020) and Paul et al. (2021), bolstered analytical robustness and facilitated the discernment of prevailing themes alongside critical research gaps.

Supplementary empirical data summaries corresponding to the extracted variables are presented in Appendix A (Tables A1–A5). The full data-extraction framework used for coding and synthesis is provided in Appendix C (Table A8).

3.1.5. Methodological Rigour

Studies were appraised using adapted frameworks based on Higgins et al. (2019), Gardner et al. (2011), and Scandura and Williams (2000) ensure methodological rigour. Qualitative studies were evaluated based on data collection methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups), analytical approaches (e.g., thematic analysis, grounded theory), and validity and reliability measures (e.g., triangulation, audit trails).

Quantitative studies were assessed according to research design (e.g., surveys, experiments, scale development), sample characteristics (e.g., sector, size, student vs. professional samples), temporal structure (cross-sectional vs. longitudinal), reporting of reliability and validity metrics, and statistical techniques (e.g., structural equation modeling, regression, ANOVA).

This structured coding also facilitated the detection of patterns across key dimensions, including geographic distribution and industry context.

Full methodological appraisal criteria are available in Appendix D for transparency. Quality appraisal and bias considerations correspond to PRISMA items 11, 18, and 21 (Appendix B).

3.1.6. Ethical Considerations

This study was based entirely on a secondary analysis of publicly available, peer-reviewed literature and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, data collection from individuals, or the use of personal or sensitive data. Consequently, formal institutional ethical review or approval was not required.

Nevertheless, ethical conduct in systematic literature reviews extends beyond the absence of human participants. It encompasses commitments to intellectual rigour, transparency in selection and analytical processes, accurate representation of cited works, and responsible reporting of findings (Page et al., 2021). These principles were upheld throughout the research process, including clear documentation of search strategies, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and analytical decisions to ensure reproducibility and accountability. Ethical transparency procedures were documented in accordance with PRISMA item 27 (Appendix B).

3.1.7. PRISMA Compliance Statement

This review was conducted and reported following the PRISMA 2020 Statement (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) outlines the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases. A completed PRISMA 2020 checklist is provided in Appendix B.

4. Results

The results of the PRISMA-guided review are presented below, corresponding to the identification, screening, and synthesis phases. Results are presented in accordance with PRISMA 2020 items 16–20, as summarised in Appendix B. The results of the systematic literature review are presented in a series of tables, compiled and analysed. Table 1 summarised the developmental trajectory of RL. Tables 2–5 present information on the authors' affiliation, publishing journal, type of publication, and the stated purpose of the study across the literature examined. Tables 4 and 5 should be read with Tables A1–A5 (see Appendix A) with a discussion about the empirical RL studies included in the review. These tables summarise a range of methodological features, such as: whether epistemological assumptions were reported (Table 5); the geographical locations and types of samples used in the studies (A1); sampling techniques and study timeframes (A2); the analytical methods applied in

quantitative research (A3); the qualitative analysis methods employed (A4); and the analytical approaches used in mixed-methods studies (A6). Together, these tables provide a comprehensive outlook of the conceptual, methodological, and thematic characteristics of RL research published between 2000 and 2025.

From the 67 journal articles reviewed, 24 distinct definitions were extracted and presented in Table 1, clearly illustrating the considerable diversity in how RL is conceptualised as a leadership theory.

Table 1. The Developmental trajectory of responsible leadership.

Author(s)	Definition/Focus of Responsible Leadership	Seminal/Contemporary
Maak and Pless (2006)	Refer to RL as a moral principle and values-based, steered relationship among leaders and stakeholders that are linked through a shared sense of meaning and motive through which they drive each other to elevated levels of commitment and motivation, to realise sustainable social change as well as value creation.	<i>Seminal:</i> Values, morality, stakeholder relationships
Maak and Pless (2006)	RL is an ethical and relational phenomenon that happens through social courses of interaction with stakeholders.	<i>Seminal:</i> Ethical, relational focus
Lynham and Chermack (2006)	Responsible leaders provide an enduring, ethical and efficient performance.	<i>Seminal:</i> Ethical, performance-focused
Maak and Pless (2006)	Responsible leaders prioritise profitability and shareholder interests while also considering the diverse expectations of stakeholders. For example, the government, employees, NGOs, suppliers, the environment and society at large.	<i>Seminal:</i> Stakeholder expectations
Maak (2007)	Centre to RL is the capacity to enable and broker sustainable, commonly beneficial relations with stakeholders, to generate stakeholder faith, goodwill and eventually a trusted entity within society (one of multi-stakeholder benefits).	<i>Seminal:</i> Stakeholder engagement, trust, and sustainability
Pless and Maak (2011)	View RL as the art of developing and sustaining social and moral relationships among business leaders and diverse followers (stakeholders). Centred on the logic of gratefulness, a sense of justice, a sense of responsibility and care for a widespread series of ecological, economic, political, social and human errands.	<i>Seminal:</i> Morality, stakeholder relations
Waldman and Galvin (2008)	RL entails shareholder and economic viewpoints that urge leaders to evaluate business subjects with comparative equality.	<i>Seminal:</i> Economic responsibility, fairness
Cameron and Quinn (2011)	RL comprises endorsement of goodness for its own sake, steered by three foremost assumptions: the inherent value assumption, the eudaemonic assumption and the amplification assumption.	<i>Seminal:</i> Goodness, moral values
Xuetong et al. (2024)	RL has three core variables: moral decision-making, value-based leadership and quality stakeholder relations.	<i>Seminal:</i> Moral decision-making, stakeholder relations
Freeman (2010)	Responsible leaders need to comprehend their internal <i>poetic self</i> in terms of previous experiences, values and predicaments of associations to move beyond followers and consider other stakeholders.	<i>Seminal:</i> Reflective, stakeholder-focused
Pless and Maak (2011)	Universal responsible leaders are people who face geographical, temporal, and cultural dynamics to effectively create positive social revolution by forming structures, societies, and methods to involve stakeholders throughout.	<i>Seminal:</i> Social change, stakeholder involvement
Maritz et al. (2011)	Responsible leaders are architects of diverse approaches within the system.	<i>Seminal:</i> System-wide leadership approaches
Voegtlin (2011); Voegtlin et al. (2012)	RL involves being conscious of and considering the outcomes of one's actions on participants, participating in active stakeholder dialogue, and weighing up and balancing the forwarded claims.	<i>Seminal:</i> Outcome-focused, dialogue-driven
Pless and Maak (2011)	Explain RL as a matrix containing four orientations that differ in grade of accountability toward others and scope of constituent group focus.	<i>Seminal:</i> Stakeholder accountability
Doh and Quigley (2014)	Responsible leaders connect with stakeholders, make their interests a priority, and in the process engage in growing tendencies to improve organisations' processes and strategies.	<i>Seminal:</i> Stakeholder engagement, organisational improvement
Stahl and Sully de Luque (2014)	Responsible leaders <i>avoid harm</i> and <i>do good</i> towards stakeholders.	<i>Seminal:</i> Harm avoidance, stakeholder well-being
Miska and Mendenhall (2018)	RL involves three inclusive outlooks: agent, stakeholder, and convergent views.	<i>Seminal:</i> Diverse leadership approaches, stakeholder-centric

Table 1. Cont.

Author(s)	Definition/Focus of Responsible Leadership	Seminal/Contemporary
Maak and Pless (2006)	Active, responsible leaders steer the business with a strategic attention on business performance, and consolidative, responsible leaders aim to accomplish the <i>double bottom line</i> of business and societal value.	<i>Contemporary</i> : Performance and societal value integration
Voegtlin (2016)	Responsibility in leadership comprises accountability of leaders (including actions in which they are not directly involved), expectation of consequences of their choices, ruling in appraisal of opposing normative norms, and acceptance of joint tactics toward problem resolution.	<i>Contemporary</i> : Accountability, consequence management
Patzer et al. (2018)	See RL as the mediator between life and the economic system, which affects equally strategic actions in addition to ethical goals to achieve communicative deeds.	<i>Contemporary</i> : Ethical mediation, strategic and ethical focus
J. J. de Klerk and Jooste (2023)	RL emphasises stakeholder engagement, balancing stakeholder interests, building social capital, and ensuring long-term sustainability.	<i>Contemporary</i> : Stakeholder engagement, social capital, sustainability
Nakra and Kashyap (2025)	RL directly influences organisational sustainability performance through the mediating role of sustainable Human Resource practices.	<i>Contemporary</i> : Organisational sustainability, sustainable Human Resources practices
Haque et al. (2025)	RL involves balancing stakeholder needs with organisational resources, focusing on essential responsibilities for maximum impact.	<i>Contemporary</i> : Resource allocation, stakeholder balance
Xiao et al. (2024)	RL predicts employee green behaviour, emphasising leaders' responsibility in fostering sustainability within complex environments.	<i>Contemporary</i> : Employee green behaviour, sustainability

Table 1 clearly shows that the process of defining RL has evolved. It started as a stakeholder-oriented, values-based, and relational concept. Key pioneers were Maak and Pless (2006), Maak and Pless (2006), and Voegtlin et al. (2012). Today, RL is a broader, multifaceted paradigm. It now integrates ethical decision-making, social responsibility, sustainability, and strategic accountability. This shift responds to complex global contexts. Initially focused on building trusting relationships and balancing diverse stakeholder interests beyond mere shareholder value, the construct has progressively incorporated environmental, societal, employee, and governance dimensions, as evidenced by contributions from Miska and Mendenhall (2018), Kempster et al. (2019), and more recent works (Haque et al., 2025; Nakra & Kashyap, 2025; Usman et al., 2025).

Despite the absence of a single definition of RL, it is widely seen as a holistic, dialogue-driven approach. It casts leaders as stewards who build relationships and promote long-term organisational and societal sustainability amid ethical, regulatory, and ecological challenges.

Tables 2–5 present information on the authors' affiliation, publishing journal, type of publication, and the stated purpose of the study across the literature examined. Table 5 should be read with Tables A1–A5 (see Appendix A) with a discussion about the empirical RL studies included in the review. These tables summarise a range of methodological features, such as: whether epistemological assumptions were reported; the geographical locations and types of samples used in the studies (A1); sampling techniques and study timeframes (A2); the analytical methods applied in quantitative research (A3); the qualitative analysis methods employed (A4) and the analytical approaches used in mixed-methods studies (A6). Together, these tables provide a comprehensive outlook of the conceptual, methodological, and thematic characteristics of RL research published between 2000 and 2025 (June).

Table 2 summarises the *institutional affiliations* of authors contributing to both theoretical and empirical publications on RL, organised by publication period. Although not central to the conceptual synthesis, Table 2 provides contextual insight into the institutional distribution of RL research, illustrating the geographic concentration of scholarly output over time. Three distinct categories of institutional affiliation were identified: (1) Single African institutions (including South African universities), which contributed 12% of the total reviewed publications; (2) Single non-African (international) institutions, which accounted

for 49% of the total output; and (3) Collaborative international institutions, responsible for the remaining 39%. Notably, instances where African (or South African) institutions collaborated with international counterparts were rare, with only one such cross-regional collaboration identified, and were thus grouped into the third category due to their minimal representation.

Table 2. Institutional affiliation of author/s by period for theoretical and empirical publications.

Institutional Affiliation	Country	Period					Total
		<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
Individual Institutions in Africa							
University of South Africa	South Africa				1	1	2
North-West University	South Africa				1		1
University of Pretoria	South Africa				1		1
Godfrey Okoye University	Nigeria				1		1
Stellenbosch University	South Africa					2	2
Chuka University	Kenya				1		1
Sub-total					5	3	8 (12%)
Individual Institutions Abroad							
University of Minnesota	USA	1					1
University of St. Gallen	USA		1				1
Colorado State University	USA		1				1
University Ramon Llull	Spain			1			1
Villanova University	USA			1			1
Ramon Llull University	Spain			1			1
University of Wollongong	Australia			1		1	2
Business School Lausanne	Switzerland			1			1
University of Zurich	Switzerland			1	1		2
University of Cambridge	UK				1		1
Jinan University	China					1	1
Arizona State University	USA					1	1
Business School Lausanne	Switzerland					1	1
Aston India Centre for Applied Research	India					1	1
Shanghai University	China				2		2
Universiti Putra Malaysia	China					1	1
Indian Institute of Technology	India					1	1
Universiti Sains Malaysia	Malaysia					1	1
University of North Florida	USA					1	1
The British University	Egypt					2	2
University of Idaho	USA					1	1
St. George’s University	USA					2	1
Management and Labour Studies	India					1	1
University of the Cumberlands	United States					1	1
University of South Australia	Australia					1	1
University of Lisbon	Portugal					1	1
Sheffield Hallam University	UK					1	1
Renmin University of China	China					1	1
Sub-total		1	2	6	4	20	33 (49%)

Table 2. Cont.

Institutional Affiliation	Country	Period					Total
		<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
Combined Institutions—Abroad							
University of Delaware, Pennsylvania State University and University of Pittsburgh	USA		1				1
University of Keele and University of Exeter	UK		1				1
University Ramon Llull and Arizona State University	Spain & USA			1			1
Institute for International Business, Institute for Social Policy and University of Vienna	Austria			1			1
Creative Learning Partners, Claremont Graduate University and University of Massachusetts at Amherst	USA			1			1
Boston College School of Management, University of Pretoria	USA & South Africa				1		1
Central Michigan University and Loyola University Chicago	USA				2		2
Institute for International Business and University of Tennessee	USA & Austria				1		1
University of South Australia and University of Zurich	Australia and Switzerland				1		1
INSEAD and Vienna University	Singapore and Austria				1		1
Audencia Business School, University of St. Gallen, University of Zurich	France, Switzerland & Germany				1		1
University of Melbourne and University of South Australia	Australia				1		1
Leipzig University, Europa–Universitaet Flensburg, Philipps University Marburg and Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz	Germany				1		1
University of Jyväskylä and University of Oulu	Finland					1	1
Kocaeli University and Bandirma Onyedi Eylul University	Turkey					1	1
Aston University, Brunel University London and Cardiff University	UK					1	1
University Islamabad, Lusíada University and International Islamic University	Portugal					1	1
Lanzhou University, Southwestern University and Tel Aviv University	China & Israel					1	1
Istanbul Medipol University, Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation and Hittite University	Turkey & Pakistan					2	2
Hazara University, COMSATS University and Asian Institute of Information Technology	Pakistan & Thailand					1	1
University of South Australia, Indian Institute of Management Sambalpur, Swinburne University and University of Melbourne	Australia & India					1	1
Arizona State University, Fudan University, Peking University	China and USA					1	1
Abertay University, Auckland University of Technology and Tokai University	UK, New Zealand & Japan					1	1
University of International Business and Economics, Hubei University of Economics, University of the Punjab and Beijing Institute of Technology	China & Pakistan					1	1
Sub-total		0	2	3	9	12	26 (39%)
Total		1 (2%)	4 (3%)	9 (13%)	18 (27%)	35 (52%)	67 (100%)

Within the first category, publications originating from African institutions, primarily South African, were limited. Of the eight papers identified, six were affiliated with South African universities, including two from the University of South Africa. Other contributions were observed from institutions in Nigeria and Kenya. Importantly, no publications from this category were found prior to 2015, underscoring the relatively recent academic engagement with RL from within the African continent. The second category, representing individual international institutions, comprised the largest share of publications, 33 out of 67 articles (49%). These were linked to 28 unique institutions, with nine based in the United States, four in China, and others located in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Switzerland. A limited number (nine) of these publications appeared before 2015, suggesting a significant increase in international scholarly output on RL within the last decade. In the third category, representing collaborations between international institutions (with occasional African involvement), four publications were produced through partnerships among U.S.-based institutions. Additional collaborations were noted between institutions in Australia and Switzerland, as well as among organisations in Singapore, Austria, China, and Israel. As with the other categories, many of these joint efforts have emerged since 2015. Despite the growing global interest, only 12% of all reviewed publications were affiliated with African institutions, with South African universities contributing 9%. This highlights a clear research gap and emphasises the need for increased scholarly attention on RL from within African organisational contexts. As indicated in Table 2, the institutional affiliations are largely concentrated in universities located within OECD and BRICS countries, with minimal representation from other regions. The relative uniformity of values reflects a concentration of RL research in established academic networks, supporting previous observations of limited global diversity and contextual representation (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Voegtlin & Scherer, 2017).

The key publication outlets (i.e., journals most frequently publishing RL-related research) from 2004 to 2025 are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Journal by period for theoretical and empirical publications reviewed.

Journal	Period					Total
	<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
Journal of Leadership and Organisational Studies	1	1	1			3
Journal of Business Ethics		2	4	3	3	12
Organisational Dynamics		1				1
Academy of Management Perspectives			2	2		4
Journal of Management Development			1			1
American Journal of Industrial and Business Management				1		1
Leadership				2		2
School Leadership & Management				1		1
Journal of Management Studies				1		1
Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa				1		1
Communication Science (UNISA)				1		1
The Journal of Values-Based Leadership				1		1
The Ecumenical Review				1		1
The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisers				1		1

Table 3. Cont.

Journal	Period					Total
	<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
New Directions for Student Services				1		1
Sustainability			1	1		2
Journal of Business Research				1	1	2
International Journal of Public Leadership					2	2
Journal of Change Management					1	1
Leadership & Organisation Development Journal					2	2
International Journal of Management					1	1
Group & Organisation Management					1	1
HTS Teologiese Studies					1	1
Management and Labour Studies					1	1
Journal of Knowledge Management					1	1
Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration					1	1
Journal of Work and Organisational Psychology					1	1
Work & Stress					1	1
Academy of Management Discoveries					1	1
Event Management					1	1
Change Management: An International Journal					1	1
Journal of Leadership Education					1	1
South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases					1	1
Organisational Psychology					1	1
Emerald Open Research					3	3
International Journal of Organisational Leadership					2	2
Non-profit Management and Leadership					1	1
Hypothesis and Theory					1	1
Journal of Business					1	1
European Management Review					1	1
Open Journal of Business and Management					1	1
Journal of Managerial Psychology					1	1
CSR and Environmental Management					1	1
Total	1 (1%)	4 (6%)	9 (13%)	18 (27%)	35 (52%)	67 (100%)

Table 3 presents the distribution of the 67 reviewed publications across various *academic journals*, based on the data extracted during the systematic literature review. A clear increase in publication activity is observed in the most recent period (2020–June 2025), which accounts for more than half of the total articles. This is followed by a notable rise in journal publications between 2015 and 2019.

Although interest in RL began to emerge more prominently from 2010 to 2014, only five journal publications were identified prior to 2010, underscoring the relatively recent growth of academic inquiry in this field. The Journal of Business Ethics was the most frequently represented outlet, contributing 12 of the 67 reviewed articles (approximately 18%).

Known for advancing research on ethical issues in business, this journal promotes interdisciplinary perspectives and welcomes diverse methodological approaches to enrich ethical understanding in corporate settings. Its strong representation in this review highlights its significant role in shaping discourse on RL.

The second-most prominent journal was the Academy of Management Perspectives, contributing four articles (6%). This journal focuses on publishing evidence-based insights with clear implications for management practice and policy. Its orientation toward actionable knowledge, rather than purely theoretical contributions, makes it a fitting platform for studies on RL within organisational settings. Both the Journal of Leadership and Organisational Studies and Emerald Open Research each accounted for three articles (4%), demonstrating their growing interest in publishing research that investigates effective leadership behaviours at the individual, group, and organisational levels. These journals aim to expand leadership theory and inform practice through innovative research contributions.

Additional journals that contributed multiple publications include Leadership, Sustainability, Journal of Business Research, Leadership & Organisation Development Journal, and the International Journal of Organisational Leadership, among others. Together, these platforms formed the journal base for the 67 publications included in the review.

The next section (Tables 4 and 5, supported by Tables A2–A5 in Appendix A) relates to methodological matters. Table 3 presents both theoretical and empirical studies included in the systematic review.

Table 4. Publication type data extracted by period for all publications.

Type		Period					Total (%)
		<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
Theoretical publications	Sub-Total	1	2	5	9	15	32 (48%)
Empirical publications	Qualitative		2	1	3	3	9
	Quantitative			1	4	13	18
	Mixed			2	2	4	8
	Sub-total	0	2	4	9	20	35 (52%)
Total (N) (%)		1 (1%)	4 (6%)	9 (13%)	18 (27%)	35 (52%)	67 (100%)

Table 4 categorises the reviewed literature by *publication type and period*, distinguishing between theoretical contributions and empirical research. The empirical works are further classified by methodological approach; namely, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. Of the total articles analysed, 32 publications (48%) were theoretical in nature, while 35 publications (52%) employed empirical methodologies. Within the empirical subset, 9 publications (13%) used qualitative designs, 18 publications (27%) were based on quantitative approaches, and 8 publications (12%) adopted mixed methods. A temporal analysis reveals that prior to 2010, research output, both theoretical and empirical on RL within organisational contexts was minimal. The decade spanning 2010 to 2019 witnessed a notable increase in scholarly engagement with the topic. Notably, research activity intensified in the period from 2020 to 2025, suggesting a growing academic interest in RL as a developing theoretical construct that warrants further empirical investigation.

A further analysis of all the 67 publications was conducted to determine whether *epistemological assumptions* were explicitly stated. These assumptions were identified through references to terms such as epistemology, research paradigm, or philosophical approach. The 32 (of the 35 empirical publications) clearly articulated their epistemological stance.

An additional 4% (3 publications) did not reference any epistemological foundation. These results should also be read with Tables A3–A5 in Appendix A.

Among the empirical studies that did indicate their philosophical positioning, quantitative designs were most prevalent, represented by 16 publications. Qualitative studies accounted for eight of the reviewed articles, while the mixed-methods approach featured in four. A temporal review spanning two decades (2004–2025) revealed a gradual increase in the explicit reporting of epistemological paradigms, indicating a maturing scholarly focus on methodological transparency. Of the 35 publications that met the criteria for this assessment, 25% adopted a positivist orientation, a philosophical stance that typically underpins quantitative methodologies, grounded in the application of natural science methods to social inquiry (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). It emphasises observable, measurable phenomena and the generation of objective knowledge based on empirical evidence (Jean Lee, 1992). Conversely, 38% of the studies aligned with an interpretivist paradigm, most often applying qualitative methods. Interpretivism views reality as socially constructed through shared meanings and lived experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017), highlighting the importance of contextual understanding and meaning making in leadership studies (Awa Uduma & Sylva, 2015; Tekin & Kotaman, 2013).

A relatively small subset (11%) of publications adopted a constructivist perspective, which typically supports mixed-methods research. Constructivism positions knowledge as co-created through individual and collective experiences, shaped by cultural and social influences (Hwang, 1996). This paradigm supports a more dynamic interpretation of RL, especially within diverse organisational environments.

Table 5 follows with a breakdown of the aim of the studies by time period across both theoretical and empirical publications.

Table 5. Study aims by period for theoretical and empirical publications.

Study Purpose	Period					Total (%)
	<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
Develop New Theory	1	3	6	10	23	43 (64%)
Review Existing Theory			2	7	9	18 (27%)
Critique Existing Theory		1	1	1	3	6 (9%)
Total (%)	1 (1%)	4 (6%)	9 (13%)	18 (27%)	35 (52%)	67 (100%)

Table 5 presents an analysis of the reviewed publications' *research aims*, categorised into three primary purposes: the development of new theoretical frameworks, the review of existing theories, and critical evaluations of established theory.

The analysis revealed that the predominant focus of RL research within organisational settings has been on the development of new theory, with 43 out of 67 publications falling into this category. This trend mirrors patterns identified in earlier findings, reaffirming the emergent and evolving nature of RL as a scholarly construct. Notably, the past decade has witnessed the most substantial growth in theory-building efforts within this domain. Between 2010 and 2019, followed by 2020 to 2025, a combined total of 35 publications—amounting to 52% of the overall sample—focused on generating novel theoretical contributions. In contrast, the period prior to 2010 reflects minimal theoretical advancement, indicating that academic engagement with this topic only gained momentum in more recent years.

Alongside theory development, 27% of publications (18 articles) aimed to synthesise and review existing theoretical contributions, while only 6 publications (9%) engaged in critical assessment or deconstruction of current frameworks. This distribution suggests a clear scholarly inclination towards conceptual expansion and exploration rather than critique or empirical validation. Overall, the findings from Table 5 suggest that RL continues

to be a conceptual space under construction, with scholars prioritising the expansion of theoretical understanding over critical evaluation or testing of existing models.

The *geographical origins* of the empirical studies were analysed according to the location of the research samples (see Table A1 for details). The findings reveal a marked concentration in the Global North, with the United States accounting for the largest share (17%), followed by South Africa and China (11% each), and the United Kingdom (9%). Contributions from other countries, such as Germany, Switzerland, and Finland, were modest (3% each), while representation from regions including Australia and Kenya remained limited. This distribution underscores a significant geographical bias in the existing RL literature, signalling the need for future research to explore underrepresented contexts in the Global South and beyond.

As outlined in Table A2, empirical studies employed diverse *sampling strategies*. Purposive stratified sampling was the most common (29%), reflecting intentional efforts to include relevant subgroups. Convenience and random sampling were each used in 17% of studies, while snowball sampling appeared in 9%. Notably, 6% of studies failed to specify the sampling method, which limits transparency and reproducibility. Overall, the prevalence of purposive approaches, particularly in qualitative and mixed-methods research, which highlights a focus on the practical operationalisation of the study, over pure representativeness.

Mixed-sector organisational samples (public and private combined) dominated (31%), followed by student populations (23%), the latter often chosen for accessibility. Public-sector employees (6%), community leaders (3%), and non-profit/NGO participants (3%) were markedly under-represented, with a further 6% of studies not clearly reporting sample composition. This distribution indicates a reliance on readily available or general organisational populations and points to underexplored contexts in public administration, civil society, and community leadership.

Cross-sectional designs overwhelmingly prevailed (69%), capturing data at a single time point. The remaining 31% of studies provided no explicit framing of the research design. This strong preference for cross-sectional approaches reveals a significant gap in longitudinal research, restricting insights into the evolution, sustainability, and long-term effects of the RL phenomenon.

Taken together, these methodological patterns underscore both the field's current practices and key opportunities for future empirical work: greater transparency in reporting, broader sectoral inclusion, and increased adoption of longitudinal designs to deepen understanding of RL dynamics.

The *analytical techniques employed in quantitative research* were reviewed, taking into consideration that most studies combined several data collection and analysis methods simultaneously; therefore, the categories are often non-mutually exclusive and overlap in practice.

A pronounced shift toward quantitative methodologies is evident, with 13 of the 18 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, reflecting a recent intensification of interest in quantifiable approaches to RL (see Table A3). Surveys dominated data collection (67%), followed by scale development and secondary/archival data (17% each). Common analytical techniques included structural equation modelling (SEM; 15%), regression analysis and descriptive statistics (13% each), factor analysis (11%), reliability testing (9%), and chi-square tests (7%), with less frequent use of methods such as aggregate rank analysis (4%) and model-fit evaluation (13%).

Overall, studies in RL continue to rely on conventional statistical tools, the past five years have seen increasing adoption of more sophisticated techniques. This rising method-

ological complexity signals a growing emphasis on empirical rigour, validated measurement, and analytical precision in RL scholarship.

The *analytical strategies employed in qualitative research* were also examined (see Table A4). Among the nine qualitative or mixed-method studies, interviews were the predominant data collection technique (used in four studies), supplemented by open-ended questionnaires (two studies) and a range of other approaches, including case studies, biographical analysis, focus groups, and participant observation, each employed in two instances. This demonstrates moderate diversity in data-gathering strategies.

For data analysis, content analysis was the most common approach (three studies), followed by thematic analysis (two studies). Additional techniques, such as discourse analysis, appreciative inquiry, triangulation, and explicit validity/reliability discussions, appeared once or twice each.

An overview of *data collection and analysis techniques employed in the mixed-methods studies* was also conducted (see Table A5). Mixed-methods studies ($n = 5$) deliberately combined qualitative and quantitative approaches to achieve triangulation and a more comprehensive view of RL. Interviews (as qualitative methodology) dominated data collection (80% of mixed-methods studies), complemented by participant observation, content analysis, and thematic analysis (each used in two studies), providing rich contextual depth. On the other hand, the most common quantitative analytical techniques were reliability testing, descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and regression analysis (each in two studies), with correlation analysis and *t*-tests each appearing once.

Overall, the mixed-methods strand exemplifies pluralistic design, effectively merging the nuanced, experiential insights of qualitative inquiry with the measurable precision of quantitative methods.

4.1. Summary of Core Findings

The systematic literature review on the conceptualisation and application of RL in organisational contexts identified four key findings, each tied to central thematic insights that are explored in more depth in the following sections. Collectively, these findings enhance our understanding of how RL is manifested in both theoretical, research and practical terms within organisations.

Finding 1: This systematic review affirms that RL is inherently *relational and multi-faceted* in nature. Far from constituting a singular or monolithic construct, RL emerges as a complex, multi-dimensional leadership paradigm that intersects with, yet extends beyond, established frameworks such as ethical, servant, and transformational leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006; Sargam & Pandey, 2024). Its distinctive hallmark lies in an explicit relational orientation that deliberately foregrounds stakeholder engagement, the cultivation of social capital, and the prioritisation of mutual respect and accountability (Voegtlin, 2011). In an era characterised by increasing organisational complexity and interdependence, this stakeholder-centric approach positions RL as particularly salient, offering a robust foundation for inclusive decision-making and collaborative leadership practices that are essential for sustainable organisational success.

Finding 2: A consistent finding throughout the reviewed literature is the profound *interconnectedness between RL and CSR*. Responsible leaders are repeatedly positioned as primary architects and drivers of CSR initiatives, leveraging their authority to integrate ethical principles and societal responsiveness into the core of organisational strategy (Maak & Pless, 2006). Beyond strengthening internal ethical cultures, these leaders simultaneously enhance organisational legitimacy, bolster reputational capital, and mitigate socio-ethical risks (Maitlo et al., 2023; Rosyada et al., 2024). This integrated pursuit of economic performance and societal purpose underscores RL's pivotal function as a strategic mechanism for generating long-term, stakeholder-inclusive value.

Finding 3: A further finding from the reviewed literature is the consistent link between RL and *long-term organisational* sustainability outcomes. Leaders who embed ethical decision-making, environmental stewardship, and social accountability into organisational priorities significantly strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of complex and volatile operating environments (Xuetong et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). Far from being limited to short-term financial indicators, RL aligns closely with the principles of sustainable development by incorporating broader ecological and societal imperatives into strategic governance. This orientation not only enables organisations to navigate global challenges more effectively but also sustains legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and enduring competitive advantage.

Finding 4: Despite substantial theoretical advancement in the field of RL, a marked *disconnect persists between conceptual elaboration and practical implementation*. The present review reveals a notable scarcity of contextually grounded empirical studies, with limited evidence drawn from diverse cultural, institutional, and sectoral environments (S. H. Siddiqui et al., 2023; Fleck & Hutchinson, 2025). Moreover, the literature continues to lack robust, operational frameworks that translate RL principles into actionable practices for organisational leaders. Addressing this theory–practice divide necessitates intensified collaboration between academia and industry to develop culturally sensitive, empirically validated, and practically oriented models that can effectively guide the cultivation and institutionalisation of responsible leadership (Boonyota et al., 2025).

4.2. Overview of Core Themes

Theme 1: A core finding of this systematic review is the profound and *reciprocal integration of CSR within the RL* construct. Across the reviewed literature, CSR is consistently conceptualised both as a constitutive dimension of RL and as one of its primary outcomes, with responsible leaders positioned as pivotal architects who institutionalise CSR principles into organisational strategy and culture.

This robust linkage underscores that responsible leaders are distinguished not merely by the pursuit of economic objectives but by their deliberate alignment of organisational behaviour with broader societal values and expectations. Consequently, RL emerges not only as a distinctive leadership paradigm but also as a strategic enabler that operationalises and advances comprehensive CSR agendas.

Theme 2: A further significant finding of this systematic review is the *centrality of ST* as the primary theoretical foundation for RL. Building on Freeman’s (1984) seminal proposition and its contemporary elaborations (e.g., Valentinov, 2024; Hargrave & Smith, 2025), the literature consistently frames organisations as accountable to a broad constellation of stakeholders—employees, communities, suppliers, and the natural environment—rather than shareholders alone. This stakeholder-oriented ontology underpins RL, positioning leaders as stewards who balance competing interests through inclusive, ethically grounded, and dialogic practices (Maak & Pless, 2006; Pless & Maak, 2011).

Across the 67 reviewed publications, close to 20% explicitly invoke ST when conceptualising RL, confirming its status as the dominant interpretive lens. This theoretical anchorage drives a marked departure from traditional hierarchical and shareholder-primacy models toward relational, collaborative approaches in which leadership legitimacy derives from the capacity to foster trust, transparency, fairness, and shared value creation (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Waldman & Balven, 2014). By embedding stakeholder inclusivity and ethical judgement at the core of decision-making, RL enhances organisational responsiveness to societal expectations, strengthens social license to operate, and equips firms to manage reputational risks and regulatory pressures more effectively. Ultimately, the integration of ST reveals RL as a paradigmatic shift toward participatory governance and

long-term stakeholder-oriented stewardship essential for resilience and legitimacy in an era of heightened globalisation and sustainability demands.

Theme 3: A prominent finding of this systematic review is the widespread adoption of the 3BL framework, as originally proposed by Elkington and Rowlands (1999) and recently reaffirmed (Agyefi-Mensah et al., 2025), as a key interpretive lens for RL. Across the reviewed studies, 14 publications (approximately 21%) explicitly employ the 3BL model, underscoring RL's commitment to simultaneously advancing economic viability, social equity, and environmental stewardship.

From an *economic perspective*, responsible leaders integrate long-term financial sustainability with ethical business practices, embedding social responsibility into supply chains, labour policies, and strategic decision-making while moving beyond short-term profit maximisation (F. Siddiqui et al., 2023).

RL strongly aligns with the *social dimension* of 3BL by prioritising stakeholder inclusion, fairness, and welfare. Leaders actively champion initiatives that reduce inequality, enhance community well-being, and foster organisational justice (Maak & Pless, 2006; Maitlo et al., 2023).

Responsible leaders emerge as catalysts for ecological (*environmental*) sustainability, driving resource-efficient practices, green innovation, and climate-conscious strategies that minimise environmental harm and strengthen corporate ecological accountability (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Abraham, 2024).

The consistent application of the 3BL framework reveals RL as a holistic leadership paradigm that redefines organisational success beyond financial performance. By balancing profitability with societal and environmental imperatives, RL responds directly to escalating stakeholder and societal expectations, positioning it as a transformative approach for achieving sustainable 3BL value creation in modern-day organisations (Amir et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Finally, and closely aligned to Theme 3, is the fundamental role of *ethical foundations*, rooted in ST, in defining and strengthening RL. Ethical decision-making and accountability emerged as a dominant dimension, appearing in over 25% of the reviewed studies. Responsible leaders are characterised by their deliberate foresight in assessing the moral implications of decisions, consistently prioritising long-term stakeholder well-being and societal benefit over short-term gains (Voegtlin, 2011; McLoughlin et al., 2025).

Far from being limited to regulatory compliance, ethical leadership within RL entails proactive cultivation of organisational integrity, embedding fairness, transparency, and accountability into both culture and operational practice (Xuetong et al., 2024; Waldman & Balven, 2014). Leaders are expected to assume full ownership of the intended and unintended consequences of their actions, thereby serving as moral exemplars who shape employee behaviour, reduce misconduct, and reinforce value alignment across the organisation (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Abdulai et al., 2025).

In an era frequently marked by corporate scandals and eroded public trust, this ethical orientation functions as a critical safeguard, enhancing stakeholder confidence, organisational legitimacy, and resilience. Ultimately, ethical decision-making and accountability are not peripheral attributes but constitutive cornerstones of RL, enabling leaders to navigate complexity, sustain trust-based relationships, and drive enduring, stakeholder-inclusive value creation.

In summary, the results presented above describe the conceptual, methodological, and contextual characteristics of RL scholarship between 2000 and 2025. The following section moves beyond description to interpret and contextualise these findings considering established theoretical frameworks; Stakeholder Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility, and the Triple Bottom Line, to identify the field's main conceptual trajectories, practical implications, and future research opportunities.

5. Discussion

The interpretation and discussion of results reflect the synthesised evidence from all 67 included studies, in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework, and correspond to PRISMA items 23a–23d (Appendix B).

5.1. Overview and Theoretical Framing

This discussion interprets and contextualises the results of the systematic literature review encompassing 67 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025. While the previous section outlined the descriptive characteristics of R research, this section examines their theoretical and practical significance, highlighting how the findings advance conceptual clarity, methodological maturity, and contextual inclusivity within RL scholarship. The synthesis affirms that RL constitutes a distinctive, multi-dimensional leadership paradigm that, while drawing upon ethical, servant, and transformational traditions, is uniquely characterised by its relational ethos and explicit commitment to stakeholder accountability. Beyond providing a descriptive synthesis, these findings advance current understanding of RL by clarifying how definitional convergence, theoretical orientation, and methodological diversity have evolved since 2000. In interpreting these patterns, the review situates RL within the broader leadership landscape, demonstrating how its stakeholder-centric ethos operationalises the principles of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and the Triple Bottom Line framework (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999) while extending their application to individual and organisational behaviour. Central to RL's theoretical architecture is the pervasive integration of ST and the 3BL framework, which collectively position RL as a pivotal instrument for advancing ethical governance, social equity, and environmental stewardship (collectively defined as CSR). The review further documents a marked acceleration in empirical research over the past decade, signaling growing scholarly recognition of RL's relevance amid escalating organisational complexity and societal expectations.

5.2. Thematic Insights from the Synthesis

Three interrelated themes emerged from the synthesis of the reviewed studies, reflecting the evolving nature of RL scholarship. These themes—conceptual integration, methodological maturity, and contextual under-representation—are discussed below in relation to the existing literature.

Conceptual Integration: The synthesis revealed persistent definitional ambiguity across RL studies, echoing the concerns of Maak and Pless (2006) but also showing gradual convergence around relational and stakeholder-accountability constructs. This conceptual consolidation indicates that RL is transitioning from an emergent construct toward a more unified theoretical domain.

Methodological Maturity: Empirical RL research has expanded significantly in the past decade, yet remains dominated by cross-sectional, single-country studies. This methodological pattern mirrors trends observed in ethical and authentic leadership research (Dinh et al., 2014), suggesting a field still maturing toward longitudinal and multi-level designs.

Contextual Under-representation: The dominance of Western and OECD-based samples underscores the contextual asymmetry of RL scholarship (Voegtlin & Scherer, 2017). The scarcity of studies in African and Global-South contexts limits theoretical generalisability, reaffirming calls for culturally situated models of RL (Koen, 2025).

Collectively, these themes underscore how responsible leadership research continues to evolve within the normative, operational, and evaluative dimensions outlined by Stakeholder Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility, and the Triple Bottom Line frameworks, respectively.

Emergent Integrative Framework

Synthesising the theoretical, methodological, and contextual patterns identified across the reviewed studies, an integrative framework of RL emerges that connects normative intent, organisational enactment, and societal impact. At its core, RL is anchored in stakeholder accountability as the normative foundation, operationalised through responsible and ethical organisational practices (CSR mechanisms), and evaluated through the Triple Bottom Line outcomes of social equity, environmental stewardship, and sustainable performance. This tripartite model highlights how RL functions as both a philosophical orientation and a practical governance system. Conceptually, it advances the field by linking individual ethical agency with institutional systems of accountability, bridging micro- (leader behaviour), meso- (organisational culture), and macro-level (societal sustainability) outcomes. The model thus positions RL as an integrative leadership paradigm that translates normative stakeholder obligations into measurable sustainable impact. Figure 2 presents this conceptual framework, illustrating the recursive relationships between RL's theoretical roots (Stakeholder Theory), its organisational mechanisms (CSR practices), and its evaluative outcomes (3BL). The framework offers a holistic structure for future theoretical refinement and empirical testing.

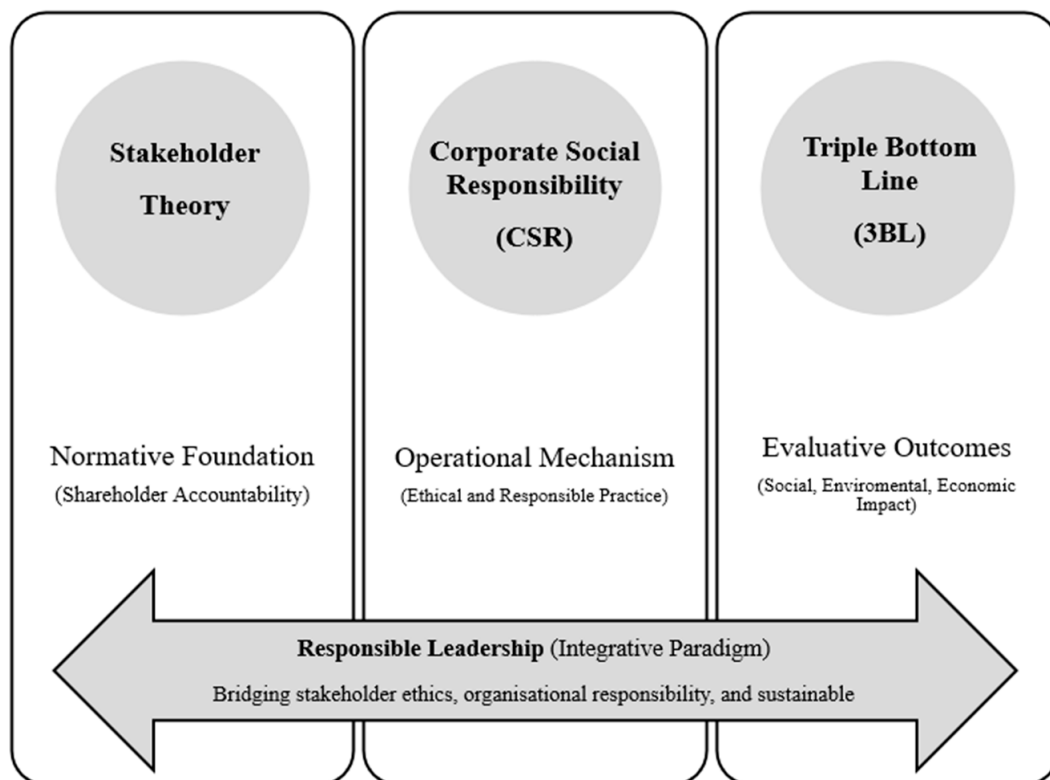


Figure 2. An Integrative Conceptual Framework of Responsible Leadership (2000–2025).

Nevertheless, notable gaps persist. The absence of standardised measurement instruments, methodological heterogeneity, and the pronounced under-representation of non-Western contexts, particularly African settings, limit the generalisability and contextual richness of existing knowledge. Nations such as South Africa, with their histories of systemic inequality, cultural pluralism, and evolving governance landscapes, offer particularly fertile yet underexplored terrain for deepening understanding of how RL is enacted and experienced in practice.

In conclusion, while RL has matured into a robust and increasingly influential construct, its full potential remains contingent upon intensified efforts to bridge the theory–practice

divide, develop rigorous and culturally attuned measurement approaches, and expand empirical inquiry into underrepresented regions. Future scholarship that addresses these imperatives will be essential for consolidating RL as a transformative framework capable of guiding organisations toward sustainable, inclusive, and ethically grounded futures.

5.3. Implications for Theory and Practice

On *theoretical level*, this systematic review advances the consolidation of RL literature by resolving persistent definitional ambiguities and elucidating thematic convergence around ethics, stakeholder orientation, and sustainability. In doing so, it establishes a clearer conceptual core for RL while underscoring the imperative for greater interdisciplinary integration and cross-cultural inquiry in future scholarship.

On a *practical level*, the findings provide a robust evidence-based foundation for designing leadership development programmes, especially in organisational and societal contexts pursuing ethical renewal, inclusive development, and heightened corporate accountability. The operationalisation of RL in organisational practice can occur through multiple, interrelated mechanisms. First, RL can be embedded within corporate governance systems by integrating stakeholder accountability metrics into executive performance evaluations, board-level decision-making, and sustainability reporting structures (Maak & Pless, 2006; Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014). Second, organisations can foster RL through leadership development and HRM initiatives that prioritise ethical reflexivity, participatory decision-making, and long-term stakeholder value over short-term performance incentives (Pless & Maak, 2011; Voegtlin, 2016). Third, RL can be institutionalised via strategic CSR programmes and stakeholder engagement platforms that promote transparent dialogue with communities, employees, and environmental actors (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). These examples demonstrate that RL transcends individual moral leadership to function as a systemic organisational capability, aligning ethical intent with measurable social and environmental outcomes. By foregrounding ethical decision-making, personal and organisational accountability, and the seamless integration of CSR, the review signals a paradigmatic reorientation of leadership expectations, from a singular focus on performance to an integrated pursuit of purpose-driven, stakeholder-aligned impact. Collectively, these mechanisms illustrate that RL is both a behavioural and structural construct, capable of being operationalised through formal governance systems, leadership competencies, and strategic stakeholder integration.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Research

The primary recommendation arises from the methodological limitations inherent in the present review, particularly those associated with its inclusion/exclusion criteria and the restricted range of databases consulted. *Future reviews* could address them by incorporating additional databases, grey literature, non-English sources, and cross-sectoral comparisons, thereby providing a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of RL across diverse global and institutional contexts.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present systematic review illuminates both the significant maturation of RL scholarship and its persistent shortcomings, including ongoing conceptual ambiguity, theoretical fragmentation, and a pronounced Western-centric bias. To advance the field toward greater rigour, relevance, and inclusivity, the following research priorities are recommended:

Refine and integrate RL definitions through the development of conceptually coherent, normatively grounded, and empirically operational definitions of RL that consistently incorporate its ethical foundations, stakeholder-centric orientation, and sustainability commitments.

Adopt longitudinal and multi-level research designs to elucidate the dynamic, long-term effects of RL on organisational outcomes, including ethical climate, employee engagement, stakeholder trust, and sustained performance.

Extend inquiry to underrepresented global contexts, as more research is required in non-Western settings, particularly Africa, Asia, and Latin America. South Africa, with its unique intersection of historical inequities, cultural diversity, and evolving governance frameworks, offers a particularly fertile context for generating context-specific RL insights.

Investigate tangible organisational and societal outcomes through the systematically examined impact of RL on critical processes and outcomes such as ethical culture formation, misconduct reduction, stakeholder relationship quality, organisational resilience, and broader societal value creation.

Addressing these imperatives will enhance conceptual clarity, methodological sophistication, and contextual inclusivity in RL scholarship. Such progress is essential not only for strengthening the theoretical edifice of the field but also for equipping leaders with evidence-based frameworks to navigate the ethical, social, and environmental complexities of contemporary organisational life.

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Directions

This systematic literature review synthesised 67 peer-reviewed studies on RL published between 2000 and 2025, mapping its conceptual evolution, theoretical grounding, and empirical development. The review demonstrates that RL represents a distinctive, multidimensional leadership paradigm that integrates ethical, relational, and sustainability-oriented perspectives. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, CSR, and the 3BL framework, RL operationalises stakeholder accountability and sustainable value creation within complex organisational and societal contexts.

The findings revealed three interrelated themes shaping the trajectory of RL scholarship: (i) conceptual integration and definitional convergence around relational and stakeholder-accountability dimensions; (ii) methodological maturity, with the field advancing but still constrained by cross-sectional and single-country designs; and (iii) contextual under-representation, as research remains heavily Western-centric with limited engagement from African, Asian, and Latin American contexts. Collectively, these findings confirm that while RL theory is maturing, its empirical and contextual depth remains uneven.

This review contributes to RL theory by consolidating fragmented conceptualisations into a coherent framework and positioning RL as a meta-theoretical bridge between leadership ethics and sustainability governance. Practically, it offers an evidence-based foundation for designing leadership development programmes, corporate governance frameworks, and organisational strategies that integrate ethical accountability, inclusivity, and long-term societal value.

This review fully adheres to PRISMA 2020 Expanded reporting standards (Page et al., 2021), with detailed item-level documentation available in Appendix B.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this review included only peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles, thereby excluding potentially relevant insights from grey literature or non-English sources. This exclusion also introduces a potential publication bias, as peer-reviewed English-language journals tend to over-represent research from Western, institutionally established, and English-speaking contexts. Consequently, the findings of this review may under-reflect emerging or region-specific perspectives that are more often disseminated through local or non-indexed publications (Kraus et al., 2020; Paul et al., 2021). Second, the focus on organisational contexts excluded community, political, or

civil leadership domains where RL might manifest differently. Third, the fixed database selection and search cutoff may have omitted recent or emerging contributions. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating broader database coverage, multilingual literature, and longitudinal and cross-sectoral comparisons. Expanding inquiry to non-Western settings, particularly within Africa, remains critical for developing contextually attuned and globally relevant models of responsible leadership. Lastly, although this review was not pre-registered, all procedures adhered to PRISMA 2020 methodological standards, and data supporting the findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

In conclusion, this review underscores the growing significance of RL as a transformative framework capable of guiding organisations toward ethical renewal, stakeholder trust, and sustainable impact. By advancing theoretical clarity, methodological rigour, and contextual inclusivity, future scholarship can strengthen RL's potential to shape leadership practice in an increasingly complex and interdependent world.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, W.K. and A.G.; methodology, W.K. and A.G.; validation, W.K. and A.G.; formal analysis, W.K. and A.G.; investigation, W.K. and A.G.; resources, W.K. and A.G.; data curation, W.K. and A.G.; writing—original draft preparation, W.K.; writing—review and editing, W.K. and A.G.; supervision, A.G.; project administration, W.K. and A.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data (sources) is openly available and is only summarised and interpreted in this study. The sources are all cited in the text and are available in the reference list.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RL	Responsible leadership
ST	Stakeholder Theory
3BL	Triple Bottom Line

Appendix A

This appendix presents supplementary empirical data referenced in Section 4. The tables provide detailed methodological and contextual information on the empirical studies included in the review, complementing the descriptive synthesis in Tables 2–5. Specifically, Tables A1–A5 summarise geographical distribution of study samples, sampling techniques, analytical methods across quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs, and other methodological features. These supplementary tables enhance transparency and replicability in accordance with PRISMA 2020 reporting standards.

Table A1. Sample location for empirical studies.

Sample Location	Empirical Study Approach			Total (%)
	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed-Method	
South Africa	2	1		3 (9%)
Kenya	1			1 (3%)
Australia			1	1 (3%)
China		4		4 (11%)
Egypt		1		1 (3%)
Finland	1			1 (3%)
Germany		1		1 (3%)
Pakistan		3	1	4 (11%)
Portugal		1		1 (3%)
Spain			1	1 (3%)
Switzerland			1	1 (3%)
Turkey		1	1	2 (6%)
Switzerland & Germany		1		1 (3%)
United Kingdom	2	1	1	4 (11%)
United States of America	2	3	1	6 (17%)
Not stated	1	1	1	3 (9%)
Total (%)	9 (26%)	18 (52%)	8 (22%)	35 (100%)

Table A2. Sample method used in empirical studies.

Sample Method	Empirical Study Approach			Total (%)
	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed-Method	
Convenience	1	5		6 (17%)
Random	1	4	1	6 (17%)
Purposive		1		1 (3%)
Purposive stratified	3	3	4	10 (28%)
Purposive snowball	1	1	1	3 (9%)
Purposive convenience	2	2	2	6 (17%)
Theoretical approach		1		1 (3%)
Not stated	1	1		2 (6%)
Total (%)	9 (26%)	18 (52%)	8 (22%)	35 (100%)

Table A3. Data collection and analytical methods by time period for quantitative method studies.

Methodological Methods		Time Period					Total (%)
		<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2024	
Data Collection	Existing Survey			1	2	9	12 (67%)
	Scale development				2	1	3 (17%)
	Secondary data					3	3 (17%)
	Total (%)			1 (6%)	4 (22%)	13 (72%)	18 * (100%)
Data Analysis	Descriptive statistics				2	4	6 (13%)
	ANOVA/MANOVA				1	3	4 (9%)
	Factor analysis			1	1	3	5 (11%)
	Pearsons's chi- squared				1	2	3 (7%)
	SEM				2	5	7 (15%)
	Aggregate rank analysis					2	2 (4%)
	Model-fit			1	2	3	6 (13%)
	Convergent validity				1	2	3 (7%)
	Regression analysis				2	4	6 (13%)
	Reliability analysis			1		3	4 (9%)
Total (%)				3 (7%)	12 (26%)	31 (67%)	46 * (100%)

*: only reported where criteria were clearly met, with values that might not correspond.

Table A4. Data collection and analytical methods by time period for qualitative studies (only reported where criteria were clearly met).

Methodological Methods		Time Period					Total (%)
		<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
Data Collection	Interviews	2	1		1		4 (27%)
	Questionnaire			1	1		2 (13%)
	Case study			1		1	2 (13%)
	Biographical analysis	1	1				2 (13%)
	Focus groups				1	1	2 (13%)
	Participant observation			1		1	2 (13%)
	Narrative analysis				1		1 (7%)
Total (%)		3 (20%)	2 (13%)	3 (20%)	4 (27%)	3 (20%)	15 * (100%)
Data Analysis	Content analysis		1	1		1	3 (27%)
	Thematic analysis		1		1		2 (18%)
	Discourse analysis			1			1 (9%)
	Appreciative enquiry		1		1		2 (18%)
	Validity/reliability				1	1	2 (18%)
	Triangulation				1		1 (9%)
Total (%)			3 (27%)	2 (18%)	4 (36%)	2 (18%)	11 * (100%)

*: only reported where criteria were clearly met, with values that might not correspond.

Table A5. Collection and analytical methods by time period for mixed-method studies (N = 10).

Methodological Methods		Time Period					Total (%)
		<2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020–2025	
Qualitative	Interviews			1	1	1	3 (30%)
	Questionnaire				1		1 (10%)
	Focus groups					1	1 (10%)
	Observation			1	1		2 (20%)
	Content analysis			1		1	2 (20%)
	Thematic analysis					1	1 (10%)
	Total (%)			3 (30%)	3 (30%)	4 (40%)	10 (100%)
Quantitative	Descriptives			1		1	2 (20%)
	Reliability			1		1	2 (20%)
	Factor analysis				1	1	2 (20%)
	Correlation				1		1 (10%)
	Regression			1		1	2 (20%)
	T-test				1		1 (10%)
	Total (%)			3 (30%)	3 (30%)	4 (40%)	10 (100%)

Appendix B. PRISMA 2020 Checklist

This systematic literature review was conducted and reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 Statement (Page et al., 2021). The table below identifies where each PRISMA reporting item is addressed in the manuscript.

Section and Topic	Item	Checklist Item	Location Where Item Is Reported
Title			
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review.	Title identifies report as a systematic literature review (Title page)
Abstract			
Abstract	2	See the PRISMA 2020 for Abstracts checklist.	Abstract—final sentence: ‘This systematic literature review was conducted and reported in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines.’
Introduction			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	Section 1 (Introduction)
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objective(s) or question(s) the review addresses.	Section 1, final paragraph
Methods			
Eligibility criteria	5	Specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review and how studies were grouped for the syntheses.	Section 3.1.2
The Information sources	6	Specify all databases, registers, websites, organisations, reference lists and other sources searched or consulted to identify studies. Specify the date when each source was last searched or consulted.	Section 3.1.1
Search strategy	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, registers and websites, including any filters and limits used.	Section 3.1.1; Appendix C (Table A6)
Selection process	8	Specify the methods used to decide whether a study met the inclusion criteria of the review, including how many reviewers screened each record and each report retrieved, whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	Section 3.1.3; Figure 1 (PRISMA flow) and Appendix C (Table A7)
Data collection process	9	Specify the methods used to collect data from reports, including how many reviewers collected data from each report, whether they worked independently, any processes for obtaining or confirming data from study investigators, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	Section 3.1.4; Appendix C (Table A8)
Data items	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought. Specify whether all results that were compatible with each outcome domain in each study were sought (e.g., for all measures, time points, analyses), and if not, the methods used to decide which results to collect.	Section 3.1.4; Appendix C (Table A8)
	10b	List and define all other variables for which data were sought (e.g., participant and intervention characteristics, funding sources). Describe any assumptions made about any missing or unclear information.	Section 3.1.4; theoretical constructs defined in Section 2
Study risk of bias assessment	11	Specify the methods used to assess risk of bias in the included studies, including details of the tool(s) used, how many reviewers assessed each study and whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	Section 3.1.4 (final paragraph), narrative bias assessment referencing Higgins et al. (2019)

Section and Topic	Item	Checklist Item	Location Where Item Is Reported
Effect measures	12	Specify for each outcome the effect measure(s) (e.g., risk ratio, mean difference) used in the synthesis or presentation of results.	Not applicable; qualitative synthesis
Synthesis methods	13a	Describe the processes used to decide which studies were eligible for each synthesis (e.g., tabulating the study intervention characteristics and comparing against the planned groups for each synthesis (item #5)).	Section 3.1.4; narrative synthesis integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence
	13b	Describe any methods required to prepare the data for presentation or synthesis, such as handling of missing summary statistics, or data conversions.	Not applicable: The review synthesised published qualitative and quantitative findings narratively; no data conversions or statistical handling were required.
	13c	Describe any methods used to tabulate or visually display results of individual studies and syntheses.	Section 4 (Results) and Appendix A. Results summarised in Tables 2–5; supplementary detail in Tables A1–A6
	13d	Describe any methods used to synthesize results and provide a rationale for the choice(s). If meta-analysis was performed, describe the model(s), method(s) to identify the presence and extent of statistical heterogeneity, and software package(s) used.	Section 3.1.4; rationale for narrative synthesis approach following Snyder (2019) and Kraus et al. (2020)
	13e	Describe any methods used to explore possible causes of heterogeneity among study results (e.g., subgroup analysis, meta-regression).	Sections 4 and 5. Variation across study design, geography, and theory analysed thematically
	13f	Describe any sensitivity analyses conducted to assess robustness of the synthesized results.	Not applicable: qualitative synthesis only; robustness ensured via inclusion criteria consistency
Reporting bias assessment	14	Describe any methods used to assess risk of bias due to missing results in a synthesis (arising from reporting biases).	Section 3.1.5 (Methodological Rigour)
Certainty assessment	15	Describe any methods used to assess certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for an outcome.	Section 3.1.5 (Methodological Rigour)
Results			
Study selection	16a	Describe the results of the search and selection process, from the number of records identified in the search to the number of studies included in the review, ideally using a flow diagram.	Section 4; Figure 1; Appendix C (Table A7)
	16b	Cite studies that might appear to meet the inclusion criteria, but which were excluded, and explain why they were excluded.	Section 3.1.3 (Study Selection Procedure)
Study characteristics	17	Cite each included study and present its characteristics.	Section 4; Tables 2–5
Risk of bias in studies	18	Present assessments of risk of bias for each included study.	Section 5 (Methodological Maturity theme); Section 3.1.5 (Methodological Rigour)

Section and Topic	Item	Checklist Item	Location Where Item Is Reported
Results of individual studies	19	For all outcomes, present, for each study: (a) summary statistics for each group (where appropriate) and (b) an effect estimate and its precision (e.g., confidence/credible interval), ideally using structured tables or plots.	Not applicable, qualitative synthesis; however, results are summarised using structured tables (Tables 2–5, Appendix A) and thematic categorisation (Section 4). No quantitative outcomes or effect sizes were calculated.
Results of syntheses	20a	For each synthesis, briefly summarise the characteristics and risk of bias among contributing studies.	Section 5 (Conceptual Integration and Methodological Maturity)
	20b	Present results of all statistical syntheses conducted. If meta-analysis was done, present for each the summary estimate and its precision (e.g., confidence/credible interval) and measures of statistical heterogeneity. If comparing groups, describe the direction of the effect.	Not applicable, no statistical synthesis or meta-analysis; narrative synthesis approach adopted following Snyder (2019) and Kraus et al. (2020).
	20c	Present results of all investigations of possible causes of heterogeneity among study results.	Section 5 (Methodological Maturity and Contextual Under-representation)
	20d	Present results of all sensitivity analyses conducted to assess the robustness of the synthesized results.	Not applicable. No quantitative synthesis or statistical sensitivity analyses performed; however, conceptual robustness addressed through consistent inclusion criteria, multi-database verification, and cross-validation of coding (Sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4).
Reporting biases	21	Present assessments of risk of bias due to missing results (arising from reporting biases) for each synthesis assessed.	Section 5 (Discussion—Methodological Limitations) and Section 6 (Limitations)
Certainty of evidence	22	Present assessments of certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for each outcome assessed.	Section 6 (Conclusion and Limitations)
Discussion			
Discussion	23a	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.	Section 5 (Discussion—Conceptual Integration and Theoretical Context).
	23b	Discuss any limitations of the evidence included in the review.	Section 6 (Limitations)
	23c	Discuss any limitations of the review processes used.	Section 6 (Limitations of Review Process)
	23d	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research.	Section 5.1 (Implications for Theory and Practice) and Section 6 (Future Research Directions).

Section and Topic	Item	Checklist Item	Location Where Item Is Reported
Other Information			
Registration and protocol	24a	Provide registration information for the review, including register name and registration number, or state that the review was not registered.	Section 6 (Conclusion and Limitations). States explicitly: “This review was not pre-registered in any review registry (e.g., PROSPERO or OSF) as it was derived from a doctoral thesis systematic literature review.”
	24b	Indicate where the review protocol can be accessed, or state that a protocol was not prepared.	Section 6 (Conclusion). States: “No separate protocol was prepared beyond the systematic literature review framework embedded in the author’s doctoral research design (Koen, 2025).”
	24c	Describe and explain any amendments to information provided at registration or in the protocol.	Not applicable—No prior registration or formal protocol amendments were made. Statement to that effect within Section 6.
Support	25	Describe sources of financial or non-financial support for the review, and the role of the funders or sponsors in the review.	Acknowledgements section
Competing interests	26	Declare any competing interests of review authors.	Conflict of Interest statement: Explicitly declares that the author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.
Availability of data, code and other materials	27	Report which of the following are publicly available and where they can be found: template data collection forms; data extracted from included studies; data used for all analyses; analytic code; any other materials used in the review.	Section 6 (Conclusion and Limitations)

Appendix C. Supplementary Methodological Details

This appendix provides additional methodological information supporting Section 3 (Materials and Methods). It summarises the detailed search strings, screening process, and data extraction framework used in the systematic review. These supplementary details are provided to enhance transparency and replicability in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Table A6. Detailed Search Strategy.

Database	Example Search String/Keywords	Date Range
Scopus	("responsible leadership" OR "responsible management") AND ("stakeholder" OR "ethical")	2000–2025
Web of Science	("ethical leadership" AND "responsibility") OR ("sustainable leadership")	2000–2025
EBSCOhost	("transformational leadership" AND "accountability") OR ("inclusive leadership")	2000–2025

Table A7. Screening Stages Summary (PRISMA Phases).

Stage	Description	Records Remaining
Identification	Records retrieved across all databases	9374
Screening	After removing 60 duplicates	9314
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed	105
Inclusion	Studies meeting all inclusion criteria	67

Table A8. Data Extraction Framework.

Data Field	Description	Example
Author(s)/Year	Bibliographic metadata	Maak and Pless (2006)
Journal/Country	Publication context	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i> /Germany
Study Type	Theoretical/Empirical/Mixed	Empirical (quantitative)
Methodology	Design and analysis method	Survey; SEM
Research Focus	Conceptual theme/construct examined	Stakeholder accountability
Context	Sector or geographic scope	Nonprofit—South Africa

Appendix D. Methodological Appraisal Criteria

This appendix summarises the quality assessment framework applied in evaluating the methodological rigour of the studies included in the systematic review. The criteria were adapted from Higgins et al. (2019), Scandura and Williams (2000), and Gardner et al. (2011). Assessment dimensions were tailored to the nature of each methodological design (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) to ensure consistent and transparent evaluation across the 67 included studies.

Study Type	Appraisal Criteria	Examples of Indicators/Questions Applied
Qualitative Studies	Credibility and trustworthiness of data; triangulation of data sources; transparency of analytic procedures; evidence of reflexivity; audit trail.	• Were multiple data sources or methods used (triangulation)? • Were coding procedures clearly described? • Was researcher bias addressed or reflexivity discussed?
Quantitative Studies	Research design appropriateness; sampling adequacy and representativeness; reliability and validity of measurement instruments; statistical transparency; control of confounding variables.	• Was the sampling method clearly defined and justified? • Were reliability and validity coefficients reported? • Were statistical analyses appropriate to the hypotheses?

Study Type	Appraisal Criteria	Examples of Indicators/Questions Applied
Mixed-Methods Studies	Integration of qualitative and quantitative components; coherence between design and objectives; clarity of triangulation strategy; consistency in reporting across components.	• Were qualitative and quantitative results meaningfully integrated? • Was the rationale for the mixed-methods approach stated? • Were data collection and analysis timelines aligned?
All Study Types (Cross-Cutting Criteria)	Ethical transparency; clarity of theoretical grounding; reporting completeness; replicability and documentation quality.	• Were ethical considerations stated? • Is the theoretical or conceptual framework explicit? • Are procedures documented sufficiently for replication?

The appraisal framework above was applied consistently during data extraction and synthesis to gauge methodological quality and ensure the reliability of conclusions derived from the included studies. These criteria support narrative assessments of rigour reported in Section 3.1.5 and align with best-practice recommendations for quality appraisal in systematic reviews of management and leadership literature.

References

- Abdulai, A. M., Iddrisu, O. A., Osman, A. I. H., & Iddrisu, A. B. (2025). Leadership integrity: A strategic pillar for ethical decision making and organisational excellence. *Advances in Research*, 26(1), 56–73. [CrossRef]
- Abraham, K. T. (2024). Responsible leadership and triple bottom line performance: Imperatives for corporate sustainability. *Journal of Global Responsibility*, 15(4), 485–500. [CrossRef]
- Agyefi-Mensah, S., Kissi, M., Attom, B. E., & Slonimpah, G. (2025). Triple top line thinking for triple bottom line performance: Reflections on outcomes of CCTU Eco-Guesthouse business plan development. *African Journal of Applied Research*, 11(1), 588–621. [CrossRef]
- Amir, M., Siddique, M., & Ali, K. (2022). Responsible leadership and business sustainability: Exploring the role of corporate social responsibility and managerial discretion. *Business and Society Review*, 127(3), 701–724. [CrossRef]
- Awa Uduma, I., & Sylva, W. (2015). A critique of the adequacy of positivist and interpretivist views of organisational studies for understanding the 21st-century organisation(s). *International Journal of Business and Management Review*, 3(4), 45–59.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods..* Allyn & Bacon.
- Boonyota, K., Thawinkarn, D., & Ketchatturat, J. (2025). Development of the empowering leadership scale for thai educational school administrators. *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 4(1), 1635–1643. [CrossRef]
- Booth, A., Martyn-St James, M., Clowes, M., & Sutton, A. (2021). *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review..* SAGE Publications.
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 595–616. [CrossRef]
- Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (2011). *Diagnosing and changing organisational culture: Based on the competing values framework* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Celikates, R., & Flynn, J. (2023). Critical theory (Frankfurt school). In *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- de Klerk, J. J., & Jooste, M. (2023). Responsible leadership and its place in the leadership domain: A meaning-based systematic review. *Business and Society Review*, 128(4), 606–634. [CrossRef]
- de Klerk, M. (2024). *New manifesto aims to restore leadership trust*. Stellenbosch Business School: Centre for Responsible Leadership. Available online: <https://www.stellenboschbusiness.ac.za/news/2024-02-29-new-manifesto-aims-restore-leadership-trust> (accessed on 12 June 2025).
- Dinh, J. E., Lord, R. G., Gardner, W. L., Meuser, J. D., Liden, R. C., & Hu, J. (2014). Leadership theory and research in the new millennium: Current theoretical trends and changing perspectives. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(1), 36–62. [CrossRef]
- Doh, J. P., & Quigley, N. R. (2014). Responsible leadership and stakeholder management: Influence pathways and organizational outcomes. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 28(3), 255–274. [CrossRef]
- Elkington, J., & Rowlands, I. H. (1999). Cannibals with forks: The triple bottom line of 21st century business. *Alternatives Journal*, 25(4), 42.
- Fleck, E., & Hutchinson, K. (2025). Integrating responsible leadership into entrepreneurship education. In *Annals of entrepreneurship education and pedagogy-2025* (pp. 189–204). Edward Elgar Publishing. [CrossRef]
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach..* Pitman.
- Freeman, R. E. (2010). *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach..* Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, W. L., Coglisier, C. C., Davis, K. M., & Dickens, M. P. (2011). Authentic leadership: A review of the literature and research agenda. *Leadership Quarterly*, 22(6), 1120–1145. [CrossRef]

- Haque, A., Islam, M. S., & Hossain, G. F. (2025). Responsible leadership and university reputation: A social cognitive perspective in Bangladeshi higher education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 39(2), 378–396. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hargrave, T., & Smith, J. (2025). A good story but not the whole story: Stakeholder theory as an ethics of capitalism. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*, 35(1), 17–30. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Higgins, J. P. T., Thomas, J., Chandler, J., Cumpston, M., Li, T., Page, M. J., & Welch, V. A. (Eds.). (2019). *Cochrane handbook for systematic reviews of interventions* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hwang, A. S. (1996). Positivist and constructivist persuasions in instructional development. *Instructional Science*, 24(5), 343–356. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Jean Lee, S. K. (1992). Quantitative versus qualitative research methods: Two approaches to organisation studies. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 9(1), 87–94. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kempster, S., Maak, T., & Parry, K. (Eds.). (2019). *Good dividends: Responsible leadership of business purpose*. Routledge.
- Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 26–41. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Koen, W. (2025). *The conceptualisation of responsible leadership and the development of a measure within a South African organisational context* [Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa].
- Kraus, S., Breier, M., & Dasí-Rodríguez, S. (2020). The art of crafting a systematic literature review in entrepreneurship research. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 16(3), 1023–1042. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kraus, S., Breier, M., Lim, W. M., Dabić, M., Kumar, S., Kanbach, D., Kanbach, D., Mukherjee, D., Corvello, V., Piñeiro-Chousa, J., Liguori, E., Palacios-Marqués, D., Schiavone, F., Ferraris, A., Fernandes, C., & Ferreira, J. J. (2022). Literature reviews as independent studies: Guidelines for academic practice. *Review of Managerial Science*, 16(8), 2577–2595. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lin, F., Ren, X., & Ding, G. (2024). How responsible leadership improves stakeholder collective performance in construction projects: The empirical research from China. *Project Management Journal*, 55(3), 264–280. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lynham, S. A., & Chermack, T. J. (2006). Responsible leadership for performance: A theoretical model and hypotheses. *Journal of Leadership & Organisational Studies*, 12(4), 73–88. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Maak, T. (2007). Responsible leadership, stakeholder engagement, and the emergence of social capital. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 74(4), 329–343. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Maak, T., & Pless, N. M. (2006). Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society—A relational perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 66(1), 99–115.
- Maitlo, S., Maitlo, S., & Shakir, N. (2023). Responsible leadership and corporate social responsibility: A systematic review. *International Journal of Social Science and Entrepreneurship*, 3(1), 380–393. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Maritz, R., Pretorius, M., & Plant, K. (2011). Exploring the interface between strategy-making and responsible leadership. In *Responsible leadership* (pp. 101–113). Springer. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Matten, D., & Moon, J. (2008). ‘Implicit’ and ‘explicit’ CSR: A conceptual framework for a comparative understanding of corporate social responsibility. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(2), 404–424. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- McLoughlin, S., Thoma, S., & Kristjánsson, K. (2025). Was Aristotle right about moral decision-making? Building a new empirical model of practical wisdom. *PLoS ONE*, 20(1), e0317842. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Miska, C., & Mendenhall, M. E. (2018). Responsible leadership: A mapping of extant research and future directions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 148(1), 117–134. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Nakra, N., & Kashyap, V. (2025). Responsible leadership and organizational sustainability performance: Investigating the mediating role of sustainable HRM. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 74(2), 409–426.
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *bmj*, 372, n71.
- Patzer, M., Voegtlin, C., & Scherer, A. G. (2018). The normative justification of integrative stakeholder engagement: A habermasian view on responsible leadership. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 28(3), 325–354. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Paul, J., Lim, W. M., O’Cass, A., Hao, A. W., & Bresciani, S. (2021). Scientific procedures and rationales for systematic literature reviews (SPAR-4-SLR). *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(4), O1–O16. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Pless, N. M. (2023). On the global emergence of responsible leadership: Purpose and social identity. *Emerald Open Research*, 1(11), 1–11. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Pless, N. M., & Maak, T. (2011). Responsible leadership: Pathways to the future. In *Responsible leadership* (pp. 3–13). Springer.
- Rademaker, T., Klingenberg, I., & Süß, S. (2025). Leadership and technostress: A systematic literature review. *Management Review Quarterly*, 75(1), 429–494.
- Rosyada, T. A., Najah, R. H., Amalia, R., Kusumasari, I. R., & Hidayat, R. (2024). The role of stakeholder involvement in the decision-making process of corporate social responsibility. *Jurnal Akuntansi, Manajemen, dan Perencanaan Kebijakan*, 2(2), 15. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sargam, S., & Pandey, A. (2024). Responsible leadership: A competency-based approach towards management of paradoxes and garnering stakeholder’s trust. *The Journal of Business Perspective*. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Scandura, T. A., & Williams, E. A. (2000). Research methodology in management: Current practices, trends, and implications for future research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(6), 1248–1264.
- Shaheen, N., Shaheen, A., Ramadan, A., Hefnawy, M. T., Ramadan, A., Ibrahim, I. A., Hassanein, M. E., Ashour, M. E., & Flouty, O. (2023). Appraising systematic reviews: A comprehensive guide to ensuring validity and reliability. *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, 8, 1268045. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Siddiqui, F., YuSheng, K., & Tajeddini, K. (2023). The role of corporate governance and reputation in the disclosure of corporate social responsibility and firm performance. *Heliyon*, 9(5), e16055. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Siddiqui, S. H., Ijaz, A., Javeria, A., & Naz, M. (2023). Systematic review and development of responsible leadership scale. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(1), 38–52. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of business research*, 104, 333–339.
- Snyder, H. (2024). Designing the literature review for a strong contribution. *Journal of Decision Systems*, 33(4), 551–558. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Stahl, G. K., & Sully de Luque, M. (2014). Antecedents of responsible leader behavior: A research synthesis, conceptual framework, and agenda for future research. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 28(3), 235–254. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Tekin, A. K., & Kotaman, H. (2013). The epistemological perspectives on action research. *Educational and Social Research*, 3(2), 123–130.
- Usman, B. M., Johl, S. K., & Khan, P. A. (2025). Evaluating the impact of green governance on sustainability performance in Nigeria's energy sector: A stakeholder perspective. *Business Management and Strategy*, 16(1), 76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Valentinov, V. (2024). Advancing a system-level perspective in stakeholder theory: Insights from the institutional economics of John R. Commons. *Social Science Information*, 63(4), 443–467. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Voegtlin, C. (2011). Development of a scale measuring discursive responsible leadership. In *Responsible leadership* (pp. 57–73). Springer.
- Voegtlin, C. (2016). What does it mean to be responsible? Addressing the missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research. *Leadership*, 12(5), 581–608. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Voegtlin, C., Patzer, M., & Scherer, A. G. (2012). Responsible leadership in global business: A new approach to leadership and its multi-level outcomes. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 105(1), 1–16. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Voegtlin, C., & Scherer, A. G. (2017). Responsible innovation and the innovation of responsibility: Governing sustainable development in a globalized world. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 143(2), 227–243. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Waldman, D. A., & Balven, R. M. (2014). Responsible leadership: Theoretical issues and research directions. *The Academy of Management Perspectives*, 28(3), 224–234. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Waldman, D. A., & Galvin, B. M. (2008). Alternative perspectives of responsible leadership. *Organisational Dynamics*, 37(4), 327–341. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Wang, G., Aslam, Q. A., Mushtaq, N., Liaqat, A., & Asmi, F. (2025). Can responsible leaders transmute sustainability & OCB among manufacturers in developing economy? A mediated moderated approach for organisational sustainability. *BMC Psychology*, 13(18), 78. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Witt, M. A., & Stahl, G. K. (2016). Foundations of responsible leadership: Asian versus Western executive responsibility orientations toward key stakeholders. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 136(3), 623–638. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Xiao, Y., Tao, X., Chen, P., & Kee, D. M. H. (2024). Leading with purpose: Unraveling the impact of responsible leadership on employee green behavior in the workplace. *Heliyon*, 10(9), e30096. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Xuetong, W., Hussain, M., Rasool, S. F., & Mohelska, H. (2024). Impact of corporate social responsibility on sustainable competitive advantages: The mediating role of corporate reputation. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 31(34), 46207–46220. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Zada, M., Khan, S., Zada, S., & Dhar, B. K. (2025). Driving sustainable development through CSR leadership: Insights into organisational learning and technological innovation. *Sustainable Development*, 33(3), 4060–4074. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.