

Activating the Sustainability Mindset: How Mindfulness-Based Training Fosters Mechanisms and Levels of Responsible Leadership Development

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Abstract. The development of a sustainability mindset (SM) has become essential for leaders seeking to address today’s ecological and societal challenges responsibly. To better understand how such a mindset can be cultivated, this study examines a postgraduate experiential training program (PETP) that integrates mindfulness practice with diverse pedagogical devices. Using a qualitative inductive design with 20 management leaders, we explore the mechanisms through which mindfulness-based experiential learning fosters an SM. Our findings show that mindfulness activates a set of mechanisms across the three original SM dimensions – knowing, being, and doing – and gives rise to an emergent fourth dimension, connecting, characterized by ethical interdependence and planetary awareness. These mechanisms translate into four levels of responsible leadership action: personal, interactional, organizational, and societal. The study demonstrates that the program’s transformative effects arise not from mindfulness alone but from the articulation of contemplative, experiential, and cognitive learning modalities. Overall, the research contributes to the literature on sustainable and responsible leadership by showing how mindfulness-based experiential training can support leaders in navigating complex challenges and fostering positive organizational and societal change.

Keywords: sustainability mindset model, responsible leadership, mindfulness, experiential learning.

1. Introduction

Current environmental and societal challenges have driven organizations to integrate ethical, environmental, and human rights considerations into their operations while seeking to contribute to sustainable development (Liao & Zhang, 2020; Lilja, 2024). This imperative underscores the critical role of socially responsible leaders (Pless & Maak, 2011; Voegtlin et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2022). Responsible leadership is defined as “*a relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in the social processes of interaction with those who affect or are*

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affected by leadership and have a stake in the purpose and vision of the leadership" (Maak & Pless, 2006, p. 103). Yet, even when leaders endorse sustainability values, translating such commitments into observable and consistent actions remains a major challenge (Menon, 2022; Lilja, 2024).

Recent research suggests that mindfulness – a receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003) – can open new pathways toward sustainability (Wamsler & Brink, 2018), particularly by fostering a Sustainability Mindset (SM), which connects ecosystem awareness, social sensitivity, and personal introspection (Hermes & Rimanoczy, 2018; Mai et al., 2024). The SM refers to a *"way of thinking and being that results from a broad understanding of the manifestations of the ecosystem, social sensitivity, as well as introspection about one's personal values and higher self, and finds expression in actions for the greater good"* (Kassel et al., 2016, p. 461). Prior research conceptualizes the SM through three interconnected dimension – knowing, doing, and being (Rimanoczy, 2017; Moon et al., 2019; Mai et al., 2024). "Knowing" involves recognizing and understanding sustainability challenges through formal education as well as cultivating awareness of one's feelings and emotions; "being" focuses on the spiritual dimension of human existence, anchored in compassion as increased awareness and deeper appreciation of others and the social benefits that derive from it (Miller et al., 2012); "doing" refers to the ability to make sustainable decisions based on one's values while remaining conscious of their impact on individuals and environments. Together, these dimensions foster an SM that encourages new ways of perceiving the world, interpreting information, analyzing issues, and identifying alternative solutions for the good of society and the planet (Mai et al., 2024). Transformational leadership theory also offers relevant insights for understanding leadership development in sustainability contexts. Transformational leaders motivate followers by articulating an inspiring vision, cultivating values-based commitment, and encouraging individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Despite this theoretical progress, empirical research has not yet explained how mindfulness-based training contributes to developing an SM in leaders, particularly concerning the mechanisms involved. This leaves a significant gap in our understanding of how mindfulness fosters sustainability-oriented leadership and how experiential pedagogical conditions enable such development. Analyzing the SM as a framework for leadership development is therefore crucial. Although the literature shows growing interest in the role of mindfulness in leadership training (Reitz et al., 2020; Rupprecht et al., 2019), few studies have examined how leaders actually develop or reinforce an SM through sustained experiential learning (Siqueira & Ramos, 2014; Waite, 2014). Thus, in this paper, we address this gap by exploring how mindfulness-based training can foster a sustainability mindset in leaders and, more specifically, how such training influences their pragmatic sustainable commitment.