

Sustainable Leadership Practices According to International Standards of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

With this article, we aim to enter the recent debate on sustainable human resource management (SHRM) and its relationships with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In detail, we deepen, both from the theoretical point of view, the link between sustainable leadership practices and the main international standards of CSR measurement

The paper consists of two main parts. The first one presents a literature overview on the sustainable leadership and on its intertwining with CSR. In the second part, an original model of the measurement of sustainable leadership practices—according Global Reporting Initiative—is applied to a business case.

Key words: Sustainable Leadership Practices, Corporate Social Responsibility, Global Reporting Initiative-GRI.

1. Introduction

The theme of sustainable leadership (SL) today presents an extreme level of topicality, because of the implications it has on the strategies and sustainability performance increasingly pursued by companies. SL therefore appears as the result of the evolution of some issues traditionally found in academic studies and managerial practices (leadership, human resource management, stakeholder approach, etc.), influenced by the recent framework on sustainability. The

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intersections among the many issues that SL embraces do not make theoretical research and application in the field easy, because of the difficulty in defining the relationship and the boundaries among them, particularly between SL and corporate social responsibility (CSR), this last becoming more and more an object of interest for enterprises of all sizes. The literary debate on SL seems focused on some main issues: The definition of SL (what it is), the role and characteristics of sustainable leaders (who implements it); the practices of SL (how it is implemented), and the relative performance of SL (how it is measured).

Many questions remain to be further explored in the literature and there are even more in the business: What are the elements of SL? Is there a validated model of SL? Is it possible to bring the SL into other important issues for which there are international standards of measurement? In particular, is it possible to find a link between SL and international standards for CSR (SA 8000; AA1000; ISO 26000; ISO 14001; Global Reporting Initiative or GRI) which demonstrates the organization's focus on the environment, people, quality, ethics, etc.?

This work aims to carry out an integration of the SL practices identified in the literature and the best practices given in international guidelines and indicators. In particular, it intends to make a connection between the foundational practices provided by the model of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) and GRI G4 indicators, as well as to verify whether this dialogue between theory and international standards can provide an indication of the SL of a company.

The structure of this work is as follows: after an overview of studies on SL, we propose a model that integrates the SL practices identified by Avery and Bergsteiner with the international standards proposed by the GRI G4 model. The model is then applied to a young company, incorporated in 2012 in a difficult environment that has relied on people and on sustainability policies for the revival of the business from the crisis.

The application of the model confirms the possibility to integrate academic studies with international standards and the sustainability practices undertaken by companies with reference to SL.

2. Literature overview

The concept of SL has developed in this century as part of organizational sustainability studies by an increasing number of scholars, who have adapted the topics of sustainability to the business world (among many other, Collins, 2001; Collins & Porras, 2000; Drucker, 2001; Dunphy, 2000, 2003; Dunphy, Griffiths & Benn, 2007; Kiewiet & Vos, 2007; Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur & Schley, 2008).

The application of sustainability issues to the business reflects, in turn, the concept of sustainable development in the two most commonly known definitions—that of the Brundtland report (1987) and that of Elkinton (1998). Therefore, corporate sustainability is the ability to meet the present needs of a company's stakeholders without compromising the ability to meet their future needs of (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002), or even the ability to balance economic objectives with social and

environmental ones. A sustainable organization is, therefore, a sustainable company that contributes to sustainable development through the production of economic, social, and environmental benefits (Hart & Milstein, 2003).

Many contributions on corporate sustainability (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Benn & Bolton, 2011; Lee, 2008; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Wilkinson, Hill, & Gollan, 2001) highlight the contact points or the differences between corporate sustainability and others issues already emerged in the past. The points of contact and intersection are, among others, quality approach (Broekhuis & Vos, 2003; Kuei & Lu, 2012; Waddock & Bodwell, 2002.); stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; 2010); sustainable human resource management studies (Enhert, 2006, 2009; Enhert & Harry, 2012; Jerome, 2013; Kramar, 2014; Kramar & Jones, 2010; Mariappanadar, 2003), and the Sustainability Balanced Scorecard approach (Figge, Hahn, Schaltegger & Wagner, 2002; Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

From the studies, there seem to be two perspectives on corporate sustainability—one cultural and one more technical. In the first perspective (Chew & Sharma, 2005; Dunphy, Griffiths, & Benn, 2007; Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010; Martina, Linnenluecke, & Griffiths, 2010; Linnenluecke, Russel & Griffiths, 2009), the focus is mainly on the cultural aspects of the change from a traditional enterprise to a sustainable enterprise, and hence to the importance of a sustainable organizational culture. In the second perspective, attention is directed more to the implementation processes of sustainability, as well as to performance measurement (Bakker, Groenewegen, & Hond, 2005; Griffith, & Petrick, 2001; Hopkins, 2005; Hubbard, 2006).

The different approaches and contributions to corporate sustainability have called into question the subject of leadership, which is deemed a corporate factor or a management lever for implementing a sustainability strategy.

The growing attention to SL also arises from studies on sustainable human resource management, which—in the approach to corporate sustainability—has become a real field study. Among the various models available in the literature, Ehnert's model (2009) is well known—it examines the impact of sustainability at three levels (individual, organizational, and social). Dubois and Dubois (2012), recognizing Ehnert and other contributors (Jackson & Seo, 2010; Schuler & Jackson, 2005; Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011), have proposed a model that relates organizational context, organizational social ecology, and human resource management—the latter in both transactional and transformational approaches. For both Human Resource management approaches; the model identifies leadership levers as well as other levers (competitive creation, organizational culture, organizational structure, and reporting).

Because of the relationships between the various fields and study approaches, the concept of SL is intertwined with others and it is difficult to delimit the borders. Hence, an SL theory is yet to be developed (Peterlin, 2016:33).

SL scholars have primarily identified a problem of definition and areas included in this form of leadership. In addition, the literature focuses on the role of the leader and the leadership practices, while only a few studies have investigated the measurement problems.

The concept of SL developed in the educational environment (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003) and from there spread to other industries (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; McCann & Sweet, 2014; Jones, Michelfeider & Nair, 2015; Széleky & Knirsch, 2005). SL has been defined by Hargreaves (2007) as a style of leadership that develops learning, does not damage, and generates positive effects for stakeholders (Hargreaves, 2007:224; Peterlin, Pearce, & Dimovski, 2015: 280). It concerns behaviours, practices and sustainable systems that enhance value for all stakeholders—internal and external, current and future (Institute Sustainable Leadership, 2015).

SL is thus a model of leadership and holistic management that embraces aspects of humanistic management, environment management, and long-time economic management, by balancing three elements—people, profits, and the environment. Its features are multidimensionality (environmental, social, economic), extensionality (all stakeholders), duration (long-term vision), integration (cultural level, decision-making, instrumental, etc.), and philanthropy (love for others).

The concept of SL shows many similarities with other concepts present in the literature. With reference to the servant leadership approach (Greenleaf, 1977; Laub, 2004; Liden, Wayne, & Henderson, 2008; Spears, 1995, 2005), according to Peterlin, Pearse, and Dimovski (2015), SL and servant leadership have the goal of being for others rather than for themselves; they both cater to a large number of stakeholders and not to the leader-follower ratio. Moreover, both see the leader as the steward and focus on building a local community. However, while the servant leadership is driven by the needs of the present, SL is projected to guarantee satisfaction of the future needs of stakeholders (Peterlin, Pearse, & Dimovski, 2015).

SL has many traits in common with transformational leadership (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Bass, Avolio, & Jung, 2003; Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002). Both have the motivational charge that leads the organization towards change; however, in transformational leadership, the emphasis is on the subjective abilities of the leader, (in particular the charisma); in SL, the element that moves the change is the will to meet stakeholders in the future.

SL is based on an ethical leadership approach (Banerjee, 2010; Olivier, 2012, Brawn & Treviño, 2006; Poff, 2010; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003); SL and ethical leadership are both directed to the construction and maintenance of a community through the correct ratios. However, SL extends the ethical approach to the environment, to way of doing business, to people, and does it with an eye to the future (Peterlin et al., 2015).

SL relies on different assumptions than charismatic leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991); the latter is among the few 'champions' with their features that create a differential, make them stand out from the others. SL is among the subjects that connect their actions to others—to those who are with them, to those who have gone before them, and to those who will come (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003).

The distinction between SL and responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006; Pless, Maak & Waldman, 2012; Székely & Knirsch, 2005) is rather more difficult. As for the CSR and corporate social sustainability (CSR), which are often considered

synonymous in substance, (Bakker, Groenewegen & Hond, 2005; Jabbour & Santos, 2008; Elkington, 2006), responsible leadership makes corporate sustainability choices, which impacts work, internal organization, and the stakeholders; hence, it is SL. CSR examines, in fact, in its micro-level perspective, how the role of leadership and the characteristics of top executives (Pless, Maak & Waldman, 2012) have an impact on CSR; it also considers the role that CSR implementation has on absenteeism, innovation, employee productivity, and sustainability at work (Anderson, Coast & Salgado, 2012). In general, CRS is closely linked to human resource management and sustainable human resource management (Blake-Scontrino & Schafer, 2012; Clarke, 2011; Enhert, 2006, 2009; Martin, Farndale, Paauwe, & Stile, 2016; Sheehan, Garavan, & Carbery, 2014); and to the predictors of performance, including leadership influences (Morgeson, Aguinis, Waldman, & Siegel, 2013).

A second theme of the literature on SL is in regard to the role of the leader, considered essential in the process of implementing a sustainability strategy and in its success. Any organization that wants to undertake a sustainability strategy that is not only green needs an organizational leader (McCann & Holt, 2011,2012).

Székely and Knirsch (2005) argue that 'sustainability takes place only when there is an active leader/manager within the company who champions this approach' (Székely and Knirsch, 2005: 629), therefore plays a leading role in promoting sustainability and the transformation of the corporate business in a sustainable and responsible manner. Jones, Michelfeder, and Nair (2015) emphasize the role of the influence of the leader on the attitudes and the behaviour of employees, especially of senior level leaders,

According to Šimanskienė and Župerkienė (2014), SL arises from the individual and spreads inside and outside the organization. The leader's role is therefore essential for the care and responsibility that he takes with himself, with his group, and with the organization, acting in accordance with the principles of sustainability. Therefore, it is the ability of a leader to influence and motivate the behaviour of the others according to the principles of sustainability. Sustainability leaders are individuals who are compelled to make a difference by deepening their awareness of themselves in relation to the world around them (Zulkifli & Latiffi, 2016).

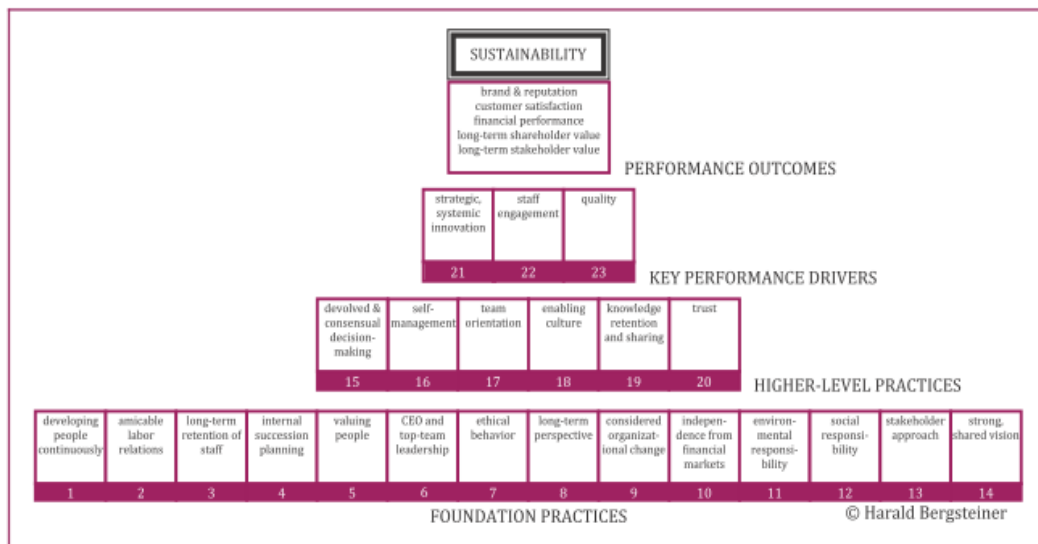
The characters and the behaviours of sustainable leaders are deduced from the sustainability principles that Hargreaves and Fink (2006) identified with reference to the education sector: A sustainable leader offers and preserves learning support to others; he secures success over time; he shares leadership with others; he develops social justice; he develops rather than depletes human and material resources; he develops environmental diversity and capacity; and he undertakes activist engagement with the environment resources.

SL practices are closely connected to the role of the leader, i.e. the activities with which SL is manifested. With reference to the practice of SL, an important first contribution is from Avery (2005). After making the distinction between the two approaches—the Rhineland and Anglo-US—the author identifies 19 characteristics of the SL, namely CEO concept, decision-making, ethical behaviour, financial markets, innovation, knowledge management, long-term perspective, management

development, organizational cultures, people priority, quality, retaining staff, skilled workforce, social responsibility, Environmental Responsibilities, Stakeholders, Teams, Uncertainty and change, Union-management relations.

These practices were then developed in later models (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2010, 2011), identifying the SL as diametrically opposed to the approach shareholders, both studied by Avery and Bergsteiner (2010) and respectively named as the 'honeybee approach' (i.e. SL philosophy) and 'locust approach' (i.e. shareholder-first philosophy). The 'honeybee model' illustrates the characters of SL, with reference to fourteen foundation practices, six higher level practices, and three key performance drivers. These are connected to the performance outcomes. The pyramid model of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) is a comprehensive and dynamic systematization of principles, attitudes, and activities related to SL. It is reproduced in Figure 1.

Figure 1- The Sustainable Leadership Pyramid from Avery and Bergsteiner



Source: Avery and Bergsteiner (2011)

The pyramid model shows the impact of SL on the organization's performance and opens an important issue—that of SL measurement. While at the strategic level, it is possible to find a connection between the SL and business performance, there is no measurement of the specific practices of SL, especially in accordance with the international guidelines and standards.

In recent years, the literature has addressed the issue of sustainability measurement according to international standards (Bustami, Na, Nasruddin, & A'mmaari, 2013; Hahn, 2013; Székely & Knirsch, 2005; Szezuka, 2015,). In this sense, the CSR has found a strong focus in the ISO 26000 (International Standard

Organization, 2010)—i.e. a new voluntary guidance that represents ‘a milestone of institutionalization of social responsibility’ (Bustami, Nasruddin, & A’mmaari, 2013). ISO 26000, in fact, indications on how businesses and organizations can operate in a socially responsible manner and supports companies and organizations to translate the principles of social responsibility in actions and effective practices, including many related to sustainable leadership.

Similarly, certification Social Accountability 8000 is an important international best practices that can well approximate the performance of Sustainable Leadership, referring to organization order, human and employee rights, environment, fair business activities, customer relations, etc.. The ISO 26000 guidelines, the certification of Social Accountability 8000, and OHSAS 18001 are then matched by the GRI G4 (Global Reporting Initiatives, 2014), which is a standard based on standard disclosures, including standard indicators. The GRI, through the application of indicators, thus allows the definition of a global framework for sustainability reporting, in which you can identify the performance of SL.

Despite the presence of some international standards that can help the organizations in the measurement of SL, a guideline does not exist to allow companies to monitor the efforts needed in SL and to compare it with other organizations, according to the shared models.

The challenge for scholars and international institutions is to seek more integration, not only among different standards but among the academic development of SL (and more generally of corporate sustainability) with the international standards of measurement.

3. The proposed model

The brief examination of the literature on SL has shown that it is a broad and complex concept that refers to all three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) and a variety of activities that relate to the work, organization, and society as a whole, as identified by Enhert (2006, 2009). Similarly, it was found that further attempts at modelling are needed, especially with reference to the most well-known international standards.

In this article, we propose a model which—starting from the foundation practices of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011)—makes the first attempt to determine a link between these practices and the GRI G4 (2014).

First, we distinguish the foundation practices of Avery and Bergsteiner in the three dimensions of sustainability according to GRI-G4 (environmental, economic, and social). Then we examine them by reference to ambits of sustainability—namely work, organization, and society. In this first attempt, we consider only the 14 foundation practices as more directly connectable with GRI G4.

The result of the distinction of the foundation practices of SL for dimensions and those for the sustainability ambits is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1- Grouping foundation practices of Avery and Bergsteiner into the three dimension of GRI (economic, social, environmental dimensions)

Sustainability dimensions of GRI G4	Foundation practices of SL according Avery and Bergsteiner	
ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS	3. long-term retention of staff 7. ethical behavior 8. long-term perspective 9. considered organizational change	10. independence from financial market 12. social responsibility 13. stakeholders approach
ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS	11. environmental responsibility	
SOCIAL DIMENSIONS	1. developing people continuously 2. amicable labor relations 3. long-term retention of staff 4. internal succession planning 5. valuing people	6. CEO and top-team leadership 9. considered organizational change 12. social responsibility 13. stakeholders approach 14. strong, shared vision

Table 2- Grouping foundation practices of Avery and Bergsteiner into the three ambits of SL (work, organization, society)

Sustainable ambits of SL	Foundation practices of SL according Avery and Bergsteiner	
WORK	1. developing people continuously 2. amicable labor relations 7. ethical behavior 8. long-term perspective	11. environmental responsibility 12. social responsibility 13. stakeholders approach 14. strong, shared vision
ORGANIZATION	1. developing people continuously 2. amicable labor relations 3. long-term retention of staff 4. internal succession planning 5. valuing people 6. CEO and top-team leadership 7. ethical behavior	8. long-term perspective 9. considered organizational change 10. independence from financial market 11. environmental responsibility 12. social responsibility 13. stakeholders approach 14. strong, shared vision
SOCIETY	3. long-term retention of staff 7. ethical behavior 8. long-term perspective 10. independence from financial market	11. environmental responsibility 12. social responsibility 13. stakeholders approach

The integration between the foundation practices related to dimensions and ambits of SL with the GRI G4 indicators is shown in the Figure 2. In this figure, at the crossing ambit/dimension of SL, we enter the GRI G4 indicators and Avery and Bergsteiner foundation practices (the practices are indicated in brackets with their respective number).

Figure 2- Our model of integration between GRI G4 indicators and foundation practices (these are in brackets and market with the number)

	1		2		3	
	GRI G4 LA 12 (8,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 3 (2,3,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 9 (1,9,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 10 (1,4,5,9,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 14 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 15 (12,13,14) GRI G4 EC 1 (8,13,14) GRI G4 EC 2 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 3 (14) GRI G4 EC 5 (14) GRI G4 EC 6 (13,14) GRI G4 EC 7 (8,9,14) GRI G4 EC 8 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 9 (14) from GRI G4 HR 1 to HR 12 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 HR 3 (2) GRI G4 HR 12 (8) from GRI G4 PR 1 to PR 9 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 PR 5, PR 6, PR 9 (8) GRI GR SO 2, SO 3, SO 4, SO 9, SO 10, SO 11 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 1, SO 5 (7,8,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 6 (12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 7, SO 8 (8,12,13,14)		GRI G4 LA 1 (2,3,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 4 (4,9,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 5 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 11 (1,4,5,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 14 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 15 (12,13,14) GRI G4 EC 1 (8,13,14) GRI G4 EC 2 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 3 (14) GRI G4 EC 4 (10,13,14) GRI G4 EC 5 (14) GRI G4 EC 6 (13,14) GRI G4 EC 7 (8,9,14) GRI G4 EC 8 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 9 (14) from GRI G4 HR 1 to HR 12 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 HR 3 (2) GRI G4 HR 12 (8) from GRI G4 PR 1 to PR 9 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 PR 5, PR 6, PR 9 (8) GRI GR SO 2, SO 3, SO 4, SO 9, SO 10, SO 11 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 1, SO 5 (7,8,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 6 (12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 7, SO 8 (8,12,13,14)		GRI G4 LA 1 (2,3,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 6 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 7 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 14 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 15 (12,13,14) GRI G4 HR 8 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 8 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 HR 6 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 EC 1 (8,13,14) GRI G4 EC 2 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 3 (14) GRI G4 EC 4 (10,13,14) GRI G4 EC 5 (14) GRI G4 EC 6 (13,14) GRI G4 EC 7 (8,9,14) GRI G4 EC 8 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 9 (14) from GRI G4 HR 1 to HR 12 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 HR 3 (2) GRI G4 HR 12 (8) from GRI G4 PR 1 to PR 9 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 PR 5, PR 6, PR 9 (8) GRI GR SO 2, SO 3, SO 4, SO 9, SO 10, SO 11 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 1, SO 5 (7,8,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 6 (12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 7, SO 8 (8,12,13,14)	
SL DIMENSIONS	ENVIRONMENTAL	4	GRI G4 EN 30 (transport) (11)	5	from GRI G4 EN 29 (compliance) to GRI G4 EN 34 (environmental grievance) (11)	
	ECONOMICS	7	GRI G4 LA 2 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 13 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 14 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 15 (12,13,14) GRI G4 EC 1 (8,13,14) GRI G4 EC 2 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 3 (14) GRI G4 EC 5 (14) GRI G4 EC 6 (13,14) GRI G4 EC 7 (8,9,14) GRI G4 EC 8 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 9 (14) from GRI G4 HR 1 to HR 12 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 HR 3 (2) GRI G4 HR 12 (8) from GRI G4 PR 1 to PR 9 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 PR 5, PR 6, PR 9 (8) GRI GR SO 2, SO 3, SO 4, SO 9, SO 10, SO 11 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 1, SO 5 (7,8,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 6 (12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 7, SO 8 (8,12,13,14)	8	GRI G4 LA 1 (2,3,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 6 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 9 (1,9,12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 14 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 15 (12,13,14) GRI G4 LA 16 (2,12,13,14) GRI G4 EC 1 (8,13,14) GRI G4 EC 2 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 3 (14) GRI G4 EC 4 (10,13,14) GRI G4 EC 5 (14) GRI G4 EC 6 (13,14) GRI G4 EC 7 (8,9,14) GRI G4 EC 8 (8,14) GRI G4 EC 9 (14) from GRI G4 HR 1 to HR 12 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 HR 3 (2) GRI G4 HR 12 (8) from GRI G4 PR 1 to PR 9 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 PR 5, PR 6, PR 9 (8) GRI GR SO 2, SO 3, SO 4, SO 9, SO 10, SO 11 (7,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 1, SO 5 (7,8,12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 6 (12,13,14) GRI G4 SO 7, SO 8 (8,12,13,14)	9
		WORK		ORGANIZATION	SOCIETY	
				SL AMBITS		

4. The testing of the proposed model: A case study

This section aims to test the proposed model on a business case. Using case studies for theory testing is abundantly addressed in the literature and gave rise to conflicting opinions (Berverland & Lindgreen, 2010; Hillebrand, Kok, & Biemans, 2001; Johnston, Leach, & Liu, 1999; Kennedy, 1979; Løkke & Sørensen, 2014; Stake, 1978; Yin, 1994; 2014), especially with reference to the generalizability of the results (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000; Kennedy, 1979; Lukka & Kasanen, 1995; Stake, 1978). This aspect is strictly dependent on the possibility of identifying, within a case, the logical relations between the variables of the study (Hillebrand, Kok, & Biemans, 2001).

Our work, which sought to propose a model of dialogue between a theoretical output (the pyramid of Avery and Bergsteiner [2011]) and international standards

on CSR by GRI G4 (2014), required an empirical test to verify the effective possibility of grasping some aspects of a company's SL through this tool. The choice fell on an Italian company that was well known in its territory and within the consortium of which it is a part. The company had been able to recover from the corporate crisis, thanks to the presence of young managers who focused on environmental, social, and economic sustainability, leveraging on the professionalism and motivation of the staff.

The chosen organization is a medium-sized Italian company involved in the delivery of facility management services to individuals, businesses, and especially public administrations (sanitation activities of rooms, reception, maintenance, gardening, logistics, pest control, etc.).

The company, which has 600 employees, is a member of a national consortium, which—through participation in tenders—assigns contracts to its member companies. In 2012, the consortium—before the state of bankruptcy of a member undertaking—decided to transfer part of the procurement from the company in bankruptcy to the newly founded company, which is examined here. Contracts were awarded territorially, mainly concentrated in the region of our company, to which were gradually added other contracts scattered throughout the national territory. The company has acquired the entire staff (both workers and office staff) through a difficult mediation process with unions and local institutions.

The company has begun its activities in very difficult conditions. There is low expertise, in addition to a lack of confidence about the future and a mistrust of the 'conquerors'. This has resulted in the absence of organizational citizenship and commitment.

At the same time, the firm is in a territory new to it; it has no contractual power at the local level and faces a financial fragility as it is a start-up.

The management understands that it faces a big challenge, which it can win by collaborating with all stakeholders. The management, due to previous work experience, has cultural orientation, knowledge, and know-how, which have led it to choose a path guided by ethics, sharing, and a sense of belonging

The company presents itself today as a reality in which a double path—cultural and formal—towards sustainability has been undertaken. The path is cultural because it has made sustainability the lever for success, focusing on sustainability towards the external context as a consequence of a new way of considering and guiding people, who are placed at the centre of the company system. This is evidenced by the firm's mission to become a reference player for the local territory as well as a symbol of professionalism, honesty, and seriousness, with a view to long-term sustainability. The path is also formal because the company is committed through a policy of the adoption of voluntary adherence to international standards in order to testify to the stakeholders the corporate social sustainability through key performance indicators (KPIs) belonging to the GRI G4 standard.

In the first phase of the model testing, we have verified, as a preliminary to the detailed application, this commitment towards sustainability that the company declared.

4.1. Method

The research method was based on theory testing using a case study. The method is much debated in the literature; the current reflections of scholars—mainly focused on the research path (Løkke & Sørensen, 2014) and quality criteria of case research (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010)—have provided elements to overcome a certain scepticism about the lack of scientific rigor in the research on case studies and the presumed lack of generalizability of the results.

Our model crosses the theory of SL with the company practices related to CSR. It was built starting from the study of the 14 foundation practices of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011), and from the study of the GRI G4 document (2014), as described in the third paragraph of this paper.

We have focused on a subset of the GRI G4 indicators, those concerning the social dimension, with particular reference to the 'Labor Practices and Decent Work' dimension and partly 'Human Rights', because they concern issues that are more specifically related to the 14 foundation practices.

Our aim was to verify if our model of integration between Avery's foundation practices and the international standard GRI G4 is suitable to detect the commitment of a company with reference to the SL. Our goal was to find the presence in the company of at least one GRI G4 indicator for each foundation practice.

In this first phase of our work, the environmental area has not been tested in depth with reference to specific GRI indicators. The company is ISO 14001-certified and some KPIs of ISO 14001 coincide with some GRI G4 environmental dimension indicators; therefore, it is conceivable that there is at least one GRI indicator corresponding to the crossings of environmental practices.

The case concerns a young company that has just started on the path of corporate sustainability, and in which we therefore did not expect to find a very high number of KPIs. Any confirmation (even within a small group of indicators implemented by the company) of the integration between the foundation practices and some KPIs attributable to the social sustainability of the GRI G4 sub-categories 'Labor Practices and Decent Work' and 'Human Rights' could have reinforced the satisfaction of the internal validity requirement of the method (Yin, 1994).

Through preliminary meetings with the management and the subsequent interviews, we verified the correspondence of the case to the objectives of the work.

In order to test the dialogue model between the foundation practices of SL and the international standards of GRI G4 in more detail, a plurality of instruments have been used: structured interviews, a questionnaire with predominantly closed questions, and document analysis.

We used the interviews for the company's top management (a total of three structured interviews), comprising a general manager, an operations manager, and the person responsible for delivery services, who is also the co-owner of the quality and systems function.

The interviews were focused on the aspects that characterize the base of the pyramid model of Avery and Bergsteiner, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3- Interview macro areas, foundation practice number, and GRI G4-associated indicators

Macro areas of the interviews	Avery and Bergsteiner's foundation practice number	GRI G4-associated indicators
Leadership style at different levels of management and their composition	6	GRI G4 LA 12
The company vision as a business driver and approach to balancing multiple stakeholders' interests	13, 14	from GRI G4 EC 1, EC 4 from GRI G4 LA 1 to GRI G4 LA 16 from GRI G4 HR 1 to GRI G4 HR 12
Orientation to ethical behaviour and social responsibility	7, 12	from GRI G4 LA 1 to GRI G4 LA 16 from GRI G4 HR1 to GRI G4 HR 12
Promotion long-term thinking at the social, economic, and financial levels and Promotion of environmental responsibility	8, 10,11	GRI G4 EC 1, EC 4, EC 7, EC 8, from GRI G4 EN 1 to GRI G4 EN 34, GRI G4 LA 16, GRI G4 HR 12
Organizational climate and protection of diversity	2	GRI G4 LA 1, LA 3, LA 16, HR 3
Organizational change management	9	GRI G4 LA 4
HRM policies (employment and turnover, training and succession planning, and staff appraisal system)	1, 3, 4, 5, 9	GRI G4 LA 1, LA 3, LA 4, LA 9, LA 10, LA 11
Accession to ISO, OHSAS, and SA international certifications	from 1 to 14	GRI G4 EC 1, EC 4, EC 5 from GRI G4 EN 1 to GRI G4 EN 34 from GRI G4 LA 1 to LA 16 from GRI G4 HR 1 to GRI G4 HR 12
Voluntary participation in national anti-corruption rules according to D. Lgs. 231/01	7, 12, 13	from GRI G4 SO3 to GRI G4 SO 5

The questionnaire, addressed to three team leaders, the technical guide, and staff units (a total of 14 questionnaires), aims to assess how those involved had carried out the implementation of the sustainability strategy and to assess the commitment and actions of leadership, as indicated in Table 4. In particular, in order to obtain feedback from the company's action on SL practices, we have broken down the practices into some questionnaire themes and items, identifying about two items for each of the foundation practices (a total of 24 questions). We asked the respondents to provide a score, on a scale of 1 to 6, on the presence of these factors within the company.

Table 4- Questionnaire macro areas, foundation practice number, and GRI G4-associated indicators

Macro areas of questionnaires' themes and items	Avery and Bergsteiner's foundation practice number	GRI G4-associated indicators
Sustainable human resource management and work well-being actions (hourly flexibility, work and family balance, etc.)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14	from GRI LA 1 to GRI G4 LA 16
Policies aimed at favouring the engagement of personnel in work activities, assessment of individual performance, incentives linked to results and merit	1, 4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 LA 10, LA 11
Actions undertaken on organizational change and innovation, actions taken to develop staff through training courses, relevance and intensity of interventions in training	1, 4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 LA 4 from LA 9 to GRI G4 LA 11
Transparency in staff recruitment policies	2, 3, 6, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 LA 1, LA 12
Occupational health and safety	7, 12, 13, 14	from GRI G4 LA 5 to GRI G4 LA 8
Managerial orientation to the transparency of communications, corporate objectives and values, diffusion of sense of identity and belonging, and attention to individual differences	4, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 LA 4, LA 12, LA 13
Orientation to the environment	11	from GRI G4 EN 1 to GRI G4 EN 34
Orientation to long-term economic and financial results	8, 10, 13, 14	GRI G4 EC 1, EC 4
Attention to the development of society, the community, and the territory	7, 8, 12, 13, 14	from GRI G4 HR 1 to GRI G4 HR 12
Attention to relationships with external stakeholders (trade unions, institutions, customers)	7, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 EC 9, GRI G4 LA 8, GRI G4 LA 15, GRI G4 HR 1, HR 6, HR 8
Image of reliability in collective perception	2, 7, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 LA 16, GRI G4 HR 12

Finally, as indicated in Table 5, we carried out a documentary analysis on the programmes in place, the measurement reports, the process re-engineering proceedings, the practices for the implementation of certifications, training undertaken and planned, as well as other materials, which allowed us to grasp the state of SL in the company. The company has made available documents for this purpose.

Table 5- Main company documentation analysed, foundation practice number, and GRI G4-associated indicators

Main company documentation analysed	Avery and Bergsteiner's foundation practice number	GRI G4-associated indicators
Financial statements (last three years)	8, 10, 13, 14	GRI G4 EC 1, EC 4
Global profile: financial soundness of the company	8, 10, 13, 14	GRI G4 EC 1, EC 4
Documentation related to ISO 9001 certification manual	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 EC 1, EC 4, EC 5 from GRI G4 LA 1 to LA 16
Documentation related to ISO 14001 certification manual	11	from GRI G4 EN 1 to GRI G4 EN 34
Documentation related to OHSAS 18001 certification manual	7, 12, 13, 14	GRI G4 LA 6 to GRI G4 LA 8
Documentation related to SA8000/ISO 26000 certification manual	7, 8, 12, 13, 14	from GRI G4 HR 1 to GRI G4 HR 12
Organization and management Model according D. Lgs. 231/01	7,8, 12, 13	from GRI G4 SO3 to GRI G4 SO 5

4.2. Results

The application of the proposed model to the business case has made it possible to detect SL within an organization, according to international standards.

The results of this exercise are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3- The GRI G4 Indicators and associated practices found in the case study

		1		2		3		
	SOCIAL	GRI G4 LA 12 (6/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 3 (2/3/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 9 (1/9/12/13/14)		GRI G4 LA 1 (2/3/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 4 (4/9/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 5 (7/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 11 (1/4/5/12/13/14)		GRI G4 LA 1 (2/3/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 6 (7/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 7 (7/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 8 (7/12/13/14) GRI G4 HR 6 (7/12/13/14)		
SL DIMENSIONS	ENVIRON- MENTAL	4	Area not tested in deep		5	Area not tested in deep		
	ECONOMICS	7	GRI G4 EC 5 (14)		8	GRI G4 LA 1 (2/3/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 6 (7/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 9 (1/9/12/13/14) GRI G4 LA 16 (2/12/13/14)		
			WORK		ORGANIZATION		SOCIETY	
			SL AMBITS					

Italics font: Indicators being implemented in the company.

With reference to the findings in the company, in regard to the variables of our model and the 14 foundation practices, we have verified the following:

Work/social dimension.

The enterprise measures: The composition of governance bodies and breakdown of employees into employee categories according to gender, age group, minority group membership, and other indicators of diversity by ‘diversity and equal opportunity’ (GRI G4–LA12); return to work and retention rates after parental leave by gender, by ‘employment’ (GRI G4–LA3); average hours of training per year per employee by gender and by employee category, by ‘training and education’ (GRI G4 - LA9).

Work/Economic dimension

The enterprise measures: Ratios of standard entry level wage by gender compared to local minimum wage in the location of operation, by ‘market presence’ (GRI G4- EC5).

Organization/Social dimension

The enterprise measures: minimum notice periods regarding operational changes, including whether these are specified in collective agreements by ‘labour/management relations’ (GRI G4–LA 4); total number and rates of new employee hires and employee turnover by age group, gender, and region by

'employment' (GRI G4 - LA1); percentage of total workforce represented in formal joint management-worker health and safety committees that help monitor and advise on occupational health and safety programmes, by 'occupational health and safety' (GRI G4-LA5) Percentage of employees receiving regular performance and career development reviews, by gender and by employee category, by 'training and education' (GRI G4-LA11).

Organization/Economic dimension

The enterprise monitors: Total number and rates of new employee hires and employee turnover by age group, gender, and region by 'employment' (GRI G4 - LA1); average hours of training per year per employee by gender, and by employee category by 'training and education' (GRI G4 - LA9); type of injury and rates of injury, occupational diseases, lost days, and absenteeism, and total number of work-related fatalities, by region and by gender by 'occupational health and safety' (GRI G4-LA6); number of grievances about labour practices filed, addressed, and resolved through formal grievance mechanisms by 'labour practices grievance mechanisms' (GRI G4-LA16).

Society/Social dimension

The enterprise monitors: total number and rates of new employee hires and employee turnover by age group, gender, and region by 'employment' (GRI G4 - LA1); 'type of injury and rates of injury, occupational diseases, lost days, and absenteeism, and total number of work-related fatalities, by region and by gender by 'occupational health and safety' (GRI G4-LA6); workers with high incidence or high risk of diseases related to their occupation by 'occupational health and safety' (GRI G4-LA7); health and safety topics covered in formal agreements with trade unions by 'occupational health and safety' (GRI G4-LA8); operations and suppliers identified as having significant risk of incidents of forced or compulsory labour and measures to contribute to the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour by 'forced and compulsory labour' (GRI G4 - HR6).

Society/Economic dimension

The enterprise monitors: Number of grievances about labour practices filed, addressed, and resolved through formal grievance mechanisms by 'labour practices grievance mechanisms' (GRI G4-LA16); type of injury and rates of injury, occupational diseases, lost days, and absenteeism, and total number of work-related fatalities, by region and by gender by 'occupational health and safety' (GRI G4-LA6); ratios of standard entry level wage by gender compared to local minimum wage at the location of operation by 'market presence' (GRI G4 - EC5).

Work/Environmental dimension, Organization/Environmental dimension, Society/Environmental dimension

As mentioned, the environmental area has not been thoroughly tested, given the presence in the company of KPIs of ISO 14001.

These coincide with some GRI G4 indicators of the environmental dimension.

As can be observed in Figure 5 when seen in comparison with Figure 1, most of the Avery and Bergsteiner practices are satisfactorily encountered in the company under consideration.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The theme of SL is very interesting for the development of the approach to sustainability reporting in the literature and in enterprises; however, SL has not yet found its complete theory. The theoretical difficulties concern the content and activities related to SL—especially how it can be measured.

In general, the problem of measuring organizational sustainability is still very open; in particular, few studies try to connect the academic results with the main international standards; even fewer contributions focus on the integration of these and SL.

We have proposed a model that creates a link between the foundation of SL practices identified by Avery and Bergsteiner, and the indicators proposed by the GRI G4.

Later, we have tested the model on a medium-sized Italian company involved in the delivery of facilities management services. For this purpose, consistent with the proposed model, the practices of the company were analysed with reference to their impact on different ambits: work, organization, and society. Similarly, the study sought to investigate the focus on sustainability in business leadership with reference to the dimensions of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social.

This study only focuses on the social dimension of GRI G4 in its sub-category of 'Labor Practices and Decent Work' and partly 'Human Rights', because they are more directly connected to the foundation practices.

The company's attention to social sustainability can be seen from the adoption of n. 11 GRI G4 LA—Labor Practices and Decent Work—out of a total of n. 16 indicators of GRI with reference the considered sub-categories; it requires a stronger adoption of KPIs dedicated to long-term thinking of an economic-financial nature (GRI G4 EC). The company, in the certification phase SA8000, is also undertaking a path of adoption of KPIs concerning ethical behavior and social responsibility (in fact, a GRI G4 HR indicator is already being adopted). Furthermore, the voluntary adherence to national anti-corruption rules determines the company's orientation towards the long-term thinking perspective and the orientation towards the stakeholders of the Avery model, and therefore a vision based on ethical behavior and social sustainability.

The application of the model has allowed the verification of the possible integration of SL practices and the considered GRI G4 model (2014).

In the company considered, we have verified the presence of at least one indicator that is attributable to each foundation practice. This can mean that a group of indicators of the GRI G4 international standard can express a certain commitment

of a company towards the SL, analysed according to the foundation practices of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011).

In this first attempt, it can be encouraging that a minimum number of indicators can exist even in a young company that has a recent history of corporate sustainability strategy and therefore has not yet produced a complete system of indicators of international standards. This could strengthen the validity of the construct.

In other words, if the correspondence between Avery and Bergsteiner's foundation practices with the GRI G4 indicators is found in a still limited number of corporate KPIs, it is conceivable that the measurement of the SL, as we have identified, should become even more possible as soon as the company completes the CSR monitoring and measurement according to international standards.

The study presents the limitations of the methodology of using the case study for theory testing (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000; Kennedy, 1979; Løkke & Sørensen, 2014; Stake, 1978; Yin, 1994; 2014). Other tests are therefore necessary to verify that in companies that have undertaken paths of sustainability and social responsibility it is possible to identify a group of indicators of the GRI G4 standard that are attributable to the foundation practices of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011), and that refer to a sort of certification of the SL. The pyramid of Avery and Bergsteiner is applicable to very different types of enterprises (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011), as is the GRI G4 standard. Therefore, if the foundation practices can find a correspondence in the GRI G4 guidelines, one might think that the model can be applied in various companies; therefore, there may be a generalizability of the results (Hillebrand, Kok, & Biemans 2001; Yin, 2014).

Our model also has the limitation of having tested only the 14 foundation practices (the base of the pyramid) out of the total of 23 practices and performances of the Avery and Bergsteiner model. It is true, however, that high-level practices and performances derive from the foundation practices; therefore, it should not be excluded a dialogue between theory and sustainable leadership practices at all levels.

Finally, from the point of view of the application of the GRI G4 standard, our study presents the limitations of having only considered predominantly the social dimension of the GRI G4, in its sub-category of 'Labour Practices and Decent Work', which is the category most directly, but not exclusively, attributable to the 14 foundation practices.

Despite this limitation, the potential contribution of the work can be as follows: For scholars, it can be an incentive to find further and more precise links between some issues of corporate sustainability (in this work, sustainable leadership) and international standards. For company management, it may be the possibility of 'certifying' not only specific processes, but also management aspects (such as SL) that find a theoretical framework of reference and at the same time can correspond to subsets of international standards. For international certification bodies, it may be to find new ways of classifying indicators (which are periodically reviewed and updated), even considering some management theoretical models, such as SL foundations.

For these reasons, the proposed model can provide ideas for future insights and development, from both a theoretical and an application point of view. Specifically, it provides a starting point for further integration between the various aspects and content of SL in the literature, and between them and the international standards.

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