

New Approaches for Sustainable Growth: Advancing Cross-sector Collaborations, New Capability Building, and Executive Leadership Development

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Abstract

Effective executive leadership is essential for the success and direction of any organization, regardless of the industry in which it operates. However, with today's interconnected economic production and distribution processes spanning complex networks operating in diverse geographic, social, and cultural markets, uncertainty has become more pronounced. In light of these changes, we propose a learning approach based on the Cross-Sector Partnership theory, which involves creating leadership collectives that work across sectors. These collectives can create innovative strategies for sustainable progress. We believe that universities can play a crucial role in fostering collaborations between different sectors, including industry and government. As hubs of knowledge creation, research, and talent development, universities are well-positioned to offer executive education programs, masterclasses, and professional development opportunities. Such initiatives can help create a culture of continuous learning and skill acquisition, which is vital for sustainable growth. By emphasizing the importance of cross-sector collaborations, we can build critical capabilities for sustainable progress and leverage executive leadership development as a powerful tool for achieving this goal.

Keywords: Sustainability; Triple helix model; Cross-sector partnership; Executive leadership; Continuous learning.

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1 21st Century Leadership Challenges

It is widely accepted that executive leadership plays a crucial role in the success and direction of any organization, spanning various sectors (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). In recent years, executive leadership has undergone significant changes due to political, technological, and economic developments in society. Decision-makers now need to handle several challenges of the 21st century, including technological disruption, increasing awareness of climate change and environmental problems, and overuse of natural resources leading to unsustainable economic development. This uncertainty has become more pronounced due to the complex networks of economic production and distribution processes running across different geographic, social, and cultural markets and conditions. The importance of executive leadership in addressing the organization's sustainability efforts cannot be overemphasized; much depends on the evaluation

of their ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) and climate change policies to achieve maximum impact (MacKie, 2023). Recent research highlights sustainability and growth as key competencies irrespective of sector, as identified by leading scholars such as Dreier et al. (2019), Kohntopp and McCann (2023), and Mahran and Elamer (2023). Sustainable leadership, which prioritizes long-term decision-making, systemic innovation, and workforce development, is essential for enhancing business resilience, competitiveness, and sustainability. Today, too often, the work of executives is fast-paced and geared toward short-term personal and organizational gains, rather than oriented towards a deep understanding of the complex mechanisms that produce impactful change; as stated by Baumgartner and Korhonen: “It is amazing how little practical improvement has been achieved in sustainable development in the everyday functioning of various organizations, national, regional and international policies or within different communities. We argue that much could be achieved if all actors and designers of the diverse tools and instruments would pause for a while to (re)consider the basics and the fundamentals of what this work should be all about and what the overall direction of the work is” (Baumgartner & Korhonen, 2010, p. 72).

In line with this statement, research has emphasized the significance of reassessing leadership priorities, prioritizing sustainability performance, and comprehending the interplay between leadership factors and sustainability outcomes (Metcalf & Benn, 2013). The aforementioned insights highlight the crucial role of sustainable leadership development in promoting organizational achievements, effectively understanding how to drive change, and conquering the obstacles presented by the current global climate. Essentially, sustainable leadership entails instituting tactics that put sustainability, resilience, and responsible expansion at the forefront, even in the face of intricate challenges. Effective leadership necessitates a holistic approach and deep knowledge of the Theory of Change – i.e., a way of thinking geared towards mapping and controlling the critical factors (for example, psychological, social, economic, and cultural processes) by which change comes about (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Simeone et al., 2023). When conceptualizing change mechanisms, leaders must prioritize ethical principles, stakeholder involvement, sustainability methodologies, and resilience enhancement; an imperative is to contemplate the enduring impact of strategic decisions on growth and sustainability. In our response to the call for a new “Innovation Paradigm in the Face of Earth Systems Governance”, we explore a learning approach (through the lens of the Cross-sector Partnership theory) of creating leadership collectives working across sectors to create innovative strategies for sustainable progress. Specifically, we illuminate the role of universities in fostering collaborations between different sectors, including industry and government, thus serving as hubs of knowledge creation, research, and talent development.

Moreover, we propose that universities can contribute significantly to promoting sustainable growth in our ever-evolving world. By providing executive education programs, masterclasses, and professional development opportunities, universities are highlighting the importance of continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and acquiring the necessary skills and expertise. With this, executives in industry and government can equip themselves with the knowledge and proficiency required to excel in their respective fields.

2 New Cross-Sector Approaches for Societal Sustainable Growth

Mahran and Elamer (2023) conducted a study to explore the relationship between the demographic characteristics of Chief Executive Officers and their impact on corporate environmental sustainability. Their research provided valuable insights into the ethical leadership and personality traits of CEOs, highlighting the importance of executive leadership development. According to our research, this involves fostering critical learning attributes and developing skills such as creative problem-solving,

strategic foresight, systems thinking, and change management, while instilling a sustainability-focused mindset (Bühning et al., 2023; Mitchell & Walinga, 2017; Drabble et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2021). In today's world, it is crucial to have robust connections to broader frameworks like the United Nations' Sustainability Goals (SDGs) and to meet the standards of corporate governance. In light of the growing societal demand for environmentally conscious policies and business practices, leaders must be equipped with the necessary tools, expertise, and understanding to navigate the intricacies and opportunities of the 21st century. By embracing sustainable growth, leaders can effectively balance the needs of the present while preserving the well-being of future generations (cf. United Nations Brundtland Commission, 1987).

To tackle sustainability challenges, organizations and policymakers must work together to make good decisions and carry them out effectively. This partnership is crucial for improving social well-being, sustainability, and the exchange of knowledge (Awan et al., 2021; Shahzad et al., 2021). Partnerships between scientists, decision-makers, and policymakers are vital for managing uncertainties, putting sustainable practices into action, and expanding programs (Frantzeskaki et al., 2019; Armitage et al., 2012). By collaborating, academia, organizations, and policymakers can close knowledge gaps, make sure their plans match up, and work together to make sustainable development happen. To this end, Klein (2020) and Bulten et al. (2021) stress the significance of strengthening collaborations between researchers, policymakers, and organizations to implement sustainable practices and resolve tensions within knowledge systems for sustainability.

In today's economy, knowledge has become an indispensable resource, the ultimate economic renewable, which cannot be depleted by use (Allee, 2009). However, effective leadership and management are essential for the successful application and utilization of knowledge, regardless of the organization's goals. Here, Peter Drucker, a renowned management expert, spoke of a knowledge society that will be defined by its ability to fulfil the needs of society through collaborative knowledge generation and sharing. Indeed, John Hagel, the founder of Deloitte's Centre for the Edge, called for firms to develop new scalable learning systems to foster new knowledge creation; a public good, which Drucker considered to be a vital responsibility of management in the 21st century (Drucker, 1995).

What are the approaches or models that leaders can use to establish meaningful connections between universities, organizations, and government actors for cross-sector collaborations and developing new sustainability-building capabilities? Let us revisit the Triple Helix model of innovation and the Cross-sector Partnership theory, both of which play important roles in fostering collaborations and innovations across different sectors. The Triple Helix model, first proposed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1995), emphasizes the interaction between academia, industry, and government, focusing on university-industry-government relations and tri-lateral networks (Carayannis & Campbell, 2011).

This model highlights the importance of collaborative efforts among these three sectors to drive innovation, economic growth, and societal development (Shin et al., 2011). The Triple Helix model is characterized by the dynamic interactions and knowledge flow between universities, industries, and governments, leading to the creation of innovation ecosystems (Simões et al., 2020). Over time, this model has evolved to include additional actors: media-based and culture-based public in the Quadruple Helix model and the natural environment in the Quintuple Helix model (Carayannis & Campbell, 2010; González-Carrasco et al., 2023).

Along similar lines, the Cross-sector Partnership theory involves collaborations between academia, private industry, and government, aiming to address complex societal challenges through joint initiatives (Arslan et al., 2021). This theory recognizes the importance of partnerships that transcend sectoral boundaries and bring together diverse stakeholders to achieve

common goals (Van Hille et al., 2020). Cross-sector partnerships can take various forms, including collaborations between universities, industries, governments, and citizens (Viale Pereira & Azambuja, 2021; Hofstetter et al., 2021).

3 Building a Continuous Learning and Sustainability Improvement Culture

In today's fast-paced world, organizations recognize the importance of continuous learning to keep their leaders up-to-date with emerging trends, technologies, and global challenges (Abulibdeh et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2021; Hamburg, 2020). Continuous learning involves acquiring new knowledge, skills, and insights over time (Burns, 2020). It requires a commitment to personal and professional development, an openness to adapt to changing circumstances, and a proactive approach to seeking out growth opportunities. It enables individuals to broaden their capabilities, stay informed of industry trends, and remain adaptable to new challenges (Buehring & Bishop, 2020). To cultivate a culture of data-driven decision-making (cf. Rajagopal et al., 2022), appropriate strategies and supportive learning environments, decision-making frameworks, and methodologies that provide opportunities for practice and feedback are crucial.

Furthermore, the emphasis on cross-sector collaboration – promoted by the aforementioned approaches such as the Triple/Quadruple/Quintuple Helix models and Cross-sector Partnership theory – could be instrumental in promoting executive leadership development and cultivating a culture of continuous learning. These approaches prioritize cross-sector collaborations, providing a framework for comprehending innovation systems and the interplay among major stakeholders, all of whom are responsible for a sustainable future. In the context of executive leadership development, these approaches can serve as a foundation for designing programs that integrate knowledge from academia, industry practices, and government policies. By incorporating principles from Triple/Quadruple/Quintuple Helix models, executive development initiatives can promote a holistic and continuous approach to learning that goes beyond traditional silos and encourages interdisciplinary collaboration (Hawkins, 2021).

Nowadays, a good number of educational programs for executive leadership already boast collaborations with external organizations. However, researchers have voiced concerns that current educational programs are not effectively meeting the needs of the broad society due to their failure to interact with varied external stakeholders, their separation from actual managerial practices, and their insufficient training of students to tackle real-world problems (Nonet et al., 2016; Chia & Holt, 2008). A common issue is that education in executive leadership tends to interact mostly with the external business community, e.g., companies that might provide the student's briefs to work on or case studies to reflect on; as such, the framework that guides the student's interaction with the external world is mostly a neoliberal approach geared toward increasing the economic performances of private companies, rather than an ethically—driven stance to impact society positively (Horn & Kennedy, 2008). Could education in executive leadership be more open toward the needs and wants of all the stakeholders that are part of our societies, including the most marginal and vulnerable ones?

Emphasizing the interconnectedness of university, industry, government, and other societal actors, cross-sector collaboration encourages individuals to engage with a variety of sources to enhance their knowledge and skills (Boyer et al., 2019). Continuous learning within these frameworks can facilitate ongoing innovation and adaptation to changing environments (Dzhengiz & Patala, 2023), but also a mission-driven approach geared to foster deep societal transition (Mazzucato, 2018). Moreover, they can inspire executives and professionals to engage in lifelong learning by recognizing the importance of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and networking

across different sectors. This approach to continuous learning aligns with the dynamic nature of innovation ecosystems (cf. Dzhengiz & Patala, 2023; Klein & Spsychalska-Wojtkiewicz, 2020) and the need for individuals to stay abreast of emerging trends and technologies.

4 Cross-sector Partnerships Knowledge Sharing, and Learning Environments

To achieve effective cross-sector collaboration, a specific mindset is required. Individuals and organizations engaging in this form of collaboration need to embrace an open and inclusive approach that values diversity, inter- and transdisciplinary perspectives, and mutual learning. This mindset should prioritize communication, trust-building, and a willingness to share knowledge and resources across different sectors. By prioritizing executive development, companies can guarantee that their leaders possess the skills necessary to understand and promote change through processes that anticipate forthcoming trends, establish competitive edges, stimulate innovation, handle disruptions, encourage perpetual learning, and strengthen organizational flexibility. Moreover, a proactive and forward-thinking attitude is essential for successful collaboration. Embracing a culture of continuous improvement and a willingness to take calculated risks are also important aspects of the mindset needed for effective collaboration. Furthermore, a collaborative mindset that values long-term relationships and shared goals is crucial for sustaining partnerships. Participants in leadership collectives working across sectors to create innovative strategies for sustainable progress should prioritize building strong networks, fostering a sense of community, and working towards common objectives that benefit all stakeholders involved (Abulibdeh et al., 2024; Dzhengiz & Patala, 2023). This collaborative mindset should also be underpinned by a commitment to transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct to ensure the integrity of the collaborative efforts (Kumar et al., 2020).

Studies by Yu and Yuizono, 2021, Moreira and Soares, 2020, and Fabiano et al., 2020 emphasize the centrality that universities can have in promoting localized knowledge spillovers and facilitating the work of cross-sector innovation systems and research networks. As Bühning (2021) notes, universities can especially contribute to the development of sustainable business models, socio-ecological resilience, and adaptive learning processes within cross-sector partnerships. By fostering effective collaboration and knowledge sharing, universities can facilitate positive change, tackle complex societal problems, and promote sustainable development in partnership with industry and government stakeholders. Universities can also prepare leaders to address wicked problems by developing capabilities to read complex phenomena and identify change mechanisms (Drabble et al., 2021), which rely on robust yet pliable and adaptable theories of change. Theory of Change frameworks provide not only a structured approach to understanding how change happens and what interventions are needed to achieve the desired impact, but also the means to envision, develop, and assess all the critical steps that lead to change (Simeone et al., 2023).

Here, masterclasses, short courses, and active learning models are examples of effective learning environments that can offer professionals tailored, streamlined, current, and captivating educational opportunities. Often featuring expert-led sessions, interactive discussions, hands-on activities, and practical insights tailored to the needs of the participants, such platforms offer in-depth exploration, skill-building, and networking opportunities, enabling individuals to gain valuable insights, refine their capabilities, and apply new learnings in real-world scenarios (Buehring, 2021, PolyU IAEE, <http://tinyurl.com/2fvx78a9>). By participating in collaborative initiatives within the masterclass setting, participants can gain insights, build relationships, and contribute to the development of innovative solutions that benefit multiple stakeholders (Vizgirdaite & Fridrikaite, 2012; Fernandes et al., 2020).

In summary, what we suggest is that executive leadership development – when built on mission-driven, cross-sector collaborations - can be a powerful leverage point to build critical capabilities for sustainable growth.

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