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► **To cite this version:**

Christian Voegtlin. What does it mean to be responsible? Addressing the missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research. *Leadership*, 2016, 12, pp.581-608. 10.1177/1742715015578936 . hal-01481471

**HAL Id: hal-01481471**

**<https://hal-audencia.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01481471>**

Submitted on 2 Mar 2017

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## **What does it mean to be responsible?**

### **Addressing the missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research**

**2015**

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#### **Acknowledgement:**

I want to thank the following for fruitful conversations about the ideas in this manuscript, or their insights on previous versions: Michael E. Brown, Harry van Burren, Colina Frisch, Ina Kaufmann, Emilio Marti.

#### **Funding:**

This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) that funded this research through the research projects on Responsible Leadership (grant numbers 100018\_135370 and 100018\_149937).

Unedited version of a paper published in Journal *Leadership*, *online first*, DOI: [10.1177/1742715015578936](https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015578936). For private use only. For correct citations and quotations please see the original publication in the Journal *Leadership*.

## **What does it mean to be responsible?**

### **Addressing the missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research**

#### **Abstract**

This paper extends research on ethical leadership by proposing a responsibility orientation for leaders. Responsible leadership is based on the concept of leaders who are not isolated from the environment, who critically evaluate prevailing norms, are forward-looking, share responsibility, and aim to solve problems collectively. Adding such a responsibility orientation helps to address critical issues that persist in research on ethical leadership. The paper discusses important aspects of responsible leadership, which include being able to make informed ethical judgments about prevailing norms and rules, communicating effectively with stakeholders, engaging in long-term thinking and in perspective-taking, displaying moral courage, and aspiring to positive change. Furthermore, responsible leadership means actively engaging stakeholders, encouraging participative decision-making, and aiming for shared problem-solving. A case study that draws on in-depth interviews with the representatives of businesses and non-governmental organizations illustrates the practical relevance of thinking about responsibility and reveals the challenges of responsible leadership.

#### **Keywords**

Ethical leadership, responsible leadership, social responsibility, stakeholder engagement, shared leadership

## **What does it mean to be responsible?**

### **Addressing the missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research**

#### **Introduction**

The public outcry over the unethical behaviour of several business leaders has triggered a surging interest in the ethical implications of leadership (see, e.g., Brown and Mitchell, 2010; Brown and Trevino, 2006; Jordan et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2012). To emphasize the practical relevance of the topic, researchers have often made the case for ethical leadership by referring to examples of recent business scandals (e.g., environmental disasters caused by companies, systemic corruption), thereby citing high-profile incidents whose consequences extend beyond the companies involved. This seems paradoxical, as the research clustered around these leadership concepts is still predominantly focused on the internal ethical implications of the leader–follower relationship and does not consider the broader ethical implications of leadership for society (e.g., Hansen et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2012; Schaubroeck et al., 2012; Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009). Many of these papers cite consequences of unethical behaviour for society in their introductory section, but then go on to investigate the positive antecedents and outcomes of ethical leadership that relate to the leader–follower interaction.

While especially the social scientific study of ethical leadership has enabled an empirical research agenda for the field and has thereby profoundly enriched our understanding and knowledge on the ethical implications of leadership (e.g., Brown and Mitchell, 2010; Den Hartog and De Hoogh, 2009; Mayer et al., 2009; Piccolo et al., 2010), the broader social responsibility of leaders remains unaddressed within this literature. However, the public response to some of the bigger corporate scandals and the repeated calls for responsible managers in the headlines indicate that there is a strong sense that businesses are responsible for their impact on society. In addition, considering responsibility as an important dimension of leadership would help to clarify some of the recently lamented limitations of the

ethical leadership literature (Eisenbeiss, 2012; Frisch and Huppenbauer, 2013; Kalshoven et al., 2011): for example, it might help scholars clarify the rather vague notion of ‘normatively appropriate conduct’ (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120), as well as which outcomes of leadership are relevant and desirable ethical outcomes, to whom leaders are accountable, and what challenges leadership faces with regard to the implications of leaders’ decisions for the society and the environment.

The social and environmental responsibility of business organizations is extensively discussed in research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g., Crane et al., 2008; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007). Yet, this stream of research is predominantly focused on organizational-level configurations of CSR and misses a micro-foundation that could explain how those making the decision in organizations impact CSR related topics and influence the CSR-character of an organization. This is lamented by many researchers in CSR (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Bies et al., 2007; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Responsible leadership seems especially important in this regard.

However, despite a growing body of literature on responsible leadership (Berger et al., 2011; Doh and Stumpf, 2005; Maak and Pless, 2006, 2009; Miska et al., 2013; Pless and Maak, 2011; Pless et al., 2012; Voegtlin et al., 2012; Waldman and Siegel, 2008), scholars still have a limited understanding of the exact responsibilities of leaders, of the stakeholders’ expectations of a responsible leader, and of the challenges of behaving ethically and responsibly as a business leader. This paper addresses these limitations and contributes to the literature by providing a critical discussion of current ethical leadership approaches, by proposing an alternative understanding of what responsibility means for leadership, by introducing the dimensions and implications of such a view, and by pointing out the challenges of a responsibility orientation for leaders. Responsible leadership can thereby even be conceived of as not only another form of leadership, but as being an essential part of

leadership as such; i.e. it promotes the idea that leadership should in itself be responsible. This paper presents an attempt to conceptualize such an understanding of responsible leadership.

The understanding of leaders' responsibility is developed from the 'social connection model' of responsibility as proposed by Young (2006, 2011). The implications of this approach for responsible leadership are discussed on the basis of four dimensions of responsibility derived from this model. These dimensions include leadership as not isolated from the internal and external organizational environment, leadership as critically evaluating prevailing rules and moral norms, leadership as forward-looking, and leadership as shared leadership that encourages collective problem-solving. The paper is constructive in that it envisions a theoretical background for the scope of leadership responsibility. These theoretical considerations are exemplified by a qualitative case study, which helps accentuate the practical relevance of responsible leadership and identify the challenges that responsible leaders face in daily business.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it critically discusses current ethical leadership approaches. Second, it presents an extended view of responsible leadership. Third, the theoretical considerations are applied to a case study that helps to illuminate the conceptual insights and that provides anecdotal evidence on how managers and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) regard responsible leadership. The paper highlights the idea that the responsibility for responding to current societal and environmental problems is much more a shared, collective and communicative endeavour than conceptualized in current leadership approaches (Fairhurst and Connaughton 2014). In addition, responsible leadership implies a certain ethical literacy (including, for instance, the ability of perspective-taking and displaying moral courage), which enables leaders to make informed ethical judgments about prevailing norms. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for leadership ethics and responsibility.

## **The missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research**

Recent research on leadership is characterized by a surging interest in the ethical and moral aspects of leadership (Ciulla, 1998), differentiating itself into concepts like authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Hunter et al., 2013; Van Dierendonck, 2011) or addressing the ethical implications of transformational leadership (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Waldman et al., 2006). However, the social scientific study of ethical leadership, building on the conceptualization and operationalization of Brown, Trevino, and their colleagues (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Brown et al., 2005; Trevino et al., 2000, 2003), has provoked the most detailed, coherent, and impactful (empirical) research around what is perceived as the ethical dimensions and implications of leadership.

Trevino et al. (2003) followed an inductive approach to develop the concept of ethical leadership. They interviewed senior managers and ethics officers, asking them to describe ethical leadership. What they discovered were two dimensions that were relevant for the perception of ethical leadership (see also, Trevino et al., 2000). The first dimension is the leader as a moral person who embraces positive characteristics and values, such as being honest and trustworthy, a fair decision maker, and someone who cares about people. The second dimension of ethical leadership is characterized by the leader as a moral manager. This dimension emphasizes the ethical leader as a positive role model who fosters ethical conduct among followers and disciplines them when they exhibit unethical behaviour (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Trevino et al., 2003). The patterns that emerged from the interviews were used to bring forth a definition of ethical leadership as ‘the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making’ (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). This definition guided the subsequent

operationalization of the concept (Brown et al., 2005), which built upon Bandura's (1986) social learning theory.

Recently, the social scientific study of ethical leadership attracted some criticism. First, the definition of ethical leadership as normatively appropriate conduct has been criticized as conceptually vague (Eisenbeiss, 2012); that is, this definition suggests a relativistic<sup>1</sup> understanding of ethical leadership that does not specify which norms are regarded as appropriate. Brown et al. argued that this definition was 'deliberately vague because, [...] what is deemed appropriate behaviour is somewhat context dependent' (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). However, this means that ethical leadership is subject to prevailing moral norms in a specific context. As a result, this definition cannot offer guidance on how an ethical leader should act when these norms seem inadequate (e.g., in cases of current unethical working conditions in some developing countries where child labour or deplorable working conditions are morally tolerated). In addition, research cannot be completely descriptive and value-free, as the authors suggest, because it is always influenced by underlying normative<sup>2</sup> assumptions (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008). This is especially the case when research deals with ethical questions of what is right or wrong. Moreover, this understanding of ethical leadership does not allow the critical evaluation of prevailing norms, nor does it prompt leaders to promote positive social change (Bies et al., 2007) when these norms seem insufficient or unethical. However, this should be an important part of being an ethical leader.

Second, the construct does not rely directly on a distinct conceptual theory (transformational leadership has been criticized on similar grounds; see Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). The theory that Brown et al. draw on – i.e., social learning theory – explains the impact of leaders as role models; i.e., how followers can learn from the positive example of their ethical leaders. However, this theory is not specific to ethical leadership because all concepts of leadership as a means of influencing followers by providing a desirable example essentially include the idea of social learning through role models (see e.g. transformational



leadership; Bass, 1985). Furthermore, the theory of social learning does not fully explain what ethical leadership is or should be, i.e., it explains the outcomes and effects of ethical leadership, but not its nature. In a recent study, Brown and Trevino (2014) specify role-modelling as being ethical and treat it as an antecedent to ethical leadership. The findings of their empirical study show that managers who had ethical role models during their childhood or career are rated as better ethical leaders by their employees. While this is an important finding that helps to accentuate the relevance of ethical role-modelling, it does not yet specify any norms of ethical behaviour.

Third, more attention should be given to how leaders set ethical goals and to what the desirable ethical outcomes of such leadership are (Eisenbeiss, 2012). Ethical leadership research focuses largely on the outcomes of the leader–follower interaction and its positive impact within the organization – for instance, how ethical leaders influence their followers’ organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and unethical behavior (Jordan et al., 2013; Kalshoven et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2009). However, this approach offers a limited view of the impact of ethical leadership because it neglects both the important and wide-reaching outcomes of leader decisions that extend beyond the organizations’ borders – e.g., their impact on the perceived corporate social responsibility, reputation, trust, or legitimacy of the organization – and the mutually beneficial partnerships with external stakeholders that may result from such decisions (Austin, 2006).

Finally, ethical leadership research has a strong leader centric view, focussing on leader characteristics and virtues and the leaders’ impact on various relational or organizational outcomes (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Mayer et al., 2012). This body of research relies considerably on assumptions of extended agency, portraying the leader often as the only one who is able to solve ethical problems (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Tourish, 2014). Such studies tend to overestimate the influence of the leader and fail to acknowledge that it may depend on the situation and on other parties with which leaders

interact. However, other parties may have different ideas of what is ethical, in which case the process of ethical decision-making should become a process of communication, where leaders and the parties with which they interact negotiate their shared understanding of desirable 'ethical' goals. The argument that will be developed at length further down is that including responsibility as a dimension of leadership can help researchers address all four critical points of the current discussion on ethical leadership. First, however, a summary of the literature that follows this general direction will be presented.

#### *Recent extensions of the concept of ethical leadership*

Recently, there has been an effort among scholars to broaden the concept of ethical leadership by including responsibility considerations. Notably, Eisenbeiss (2012) offered four central orientations as an extension to ethical leadership, including a responsibility and sustainability orientation, which presupposes 'leaders' long-term views on success and their concern for the welfare of society and the environment' (Eisenbeiss, 2012, p. 6). However, the proposed responsibility orientation is not explained in much detail. Furthermore, the article does not distinguish between the four orientations (i.e., human orientation, justice orientation, responsibility and sustainability orientation, and moderation orientation) when discussing their relationship to antecedents and outcomes; it rather suggests propositions summarizing the impact of all ethical orientations. Finally, the challenges of such a responsibility orientation are not addressed. However, this approach already connects quite well to central aspects discussed in the responsible leadership literature which will be laid out in the following sections of this paper.

De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) treated the social responsibility of leaders as an antecedent to ethical leadership, but not as an essential part of leadership with implications for the fundamental dimensions of the leader as a moral person and a moral manager. Kalshoven et al. (2011) incorporated in their multi-dimensional measure of ethical leader behaviour the

dimensions of ‘role clarification’ and ‘concern for sustainability.’ However, the primary focus of the measure is still the leader–follower interaction (see, e.g., the descriptions of the ethical leader behavior dimensions; Kalshoven et al., 2011, p. 54). ‘Role clarification’ refers to the leader’s task of clarifying his or her subordinates’ responsibilities in the workplace.

Furthermore, the authors limit the ‘concern for sustainability’ to an obligation on the part of the leader to ‘care about the environment and stimulate recycling’ (Kalshoven et al., 2011, p. 54); however, this approach does not amount to an explicit and encompassing responsibility orientation.

In another study, Frisch and Huppenbauer (2013) argued that the concept of ethical leadership should be extended to include a stakeholder dimension and that it should take into account the consequences of leadership for external stakeholders. They substantiated their arguments with results from qualitative interviews with ethical leaders. This approach points in a direction similar to that in the current responsible leadership literature.

#### *Recent research on responsible leadership*

Research on responsible leadership has emerged from the discussion about the scope of responsibility of business leaders, contrasting a shareholder and broader stakeholder orientation (Doh and Quigley, 2014; Waldman and Galvin, 2008; Waldman and Siegel, 2008; for the stakeholder view, see also, Freeman, 1984). Most of this research considers the implications of an increasingly complex and uncertain global business environment for leadership. In global business, leaders face, on the one hand, heterogeneous laws, regulations, and moral expectations and on the other, increasing demands from various stakeholders to justify the conduct of their organization (Maak and Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Thus, responsible leadership can be seen as a task of interacting with and moderating between different stakeholders in order to maintain organizational legitimacy (Voegtlin et al., 2012). Responsible leadership research thereby broadens the understanding of leadership ethics in

that it has an explicit stakeholder focus and connects leadership with firm-level issues of CSR (Filatotchev and Nakajima, 2014; Maak and Pless, 2006; Waldman, 2011). The work of Maak and Pless in particular has advanced considerably the emerging field of responsible leadership research (see e.g., Maak, 2007; Maak and Pless, 2006, 2009; Pless, 2007; Pless and Maak, 2011). The authors suggest that responsible leadership is ‘a social-relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction’ (Maak and Pless, 2006, p. 99) and define responsible leadership

as a values-based and through ethical principles driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders who are connected through a shared sense of meaning and purpose through which they raise one another to higher levels of motivation and commitment for achieving sustainable values creation and social change. (Pless, 2007, p. 438)

Despite this progress, however, the phenomenon of responsible leadership has yet to be studied in sufficient depth. The definition of responsible leadership that Maak and Pless provide, for instance (Maak and Pless, 2006), does not specify the values and ethical principles that responsible leadership should be based on (Pless, 2007). In addition, most approaches to responsible leadership to date focus narrowly on the shareholder–stakeholder dichotomy in order to define responsibility (Waldman and Galvin, 2008; Waldman and Siegel, 2008). Consequently, current research does not explain sufficiently the scope of a business leader’s responsibility nor is there a commonly accepted definition of responsibility (Waldman, 2011). Moreover, the influential approach of Maak and Pless still places a strong focus on leader agency. The authors put the leaders in the centre of stakeholder relations and regard them as the ones able ‘to weave a web of inclusion’ (Maak and Pless, 2006, p. 104). Furthermore, the antecedents and challenges of responsible leadership are in need of further research (Stahl and Sully de Luque, 2014; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Research has shown the ways in which business leaders learn to become more aware of their social responsibility if they engage in social partnership projects (Austin, 2006; Pless et al., 2011). However, little is known about what it takes to be a responsible leader and what the difficulties of being a

responsible leader are (Maak and Pless, 2009). Finally, there is no comprehensive discussion about the distinction between responsible and ethical leadership that explains why we need responsible leadership over and above current ethical leadership approaches (for first exceptions, see Pless and Maak, 2011; Voegtlin, 2011). This paper adds to research on responsible leadership by providing a more holistic understanding of the subject and a more thoroughly defined notion of responsibility and by discussing the challenges of responsible leadership.

### **Why is the orientation towards responsibility necessary for leaders? Advocating and expanding the concept of responsible leadership**

The word ‘responsibility’ is used in different situations with different meanings. One can use the term to ascribe an event to a cause (e.g., the heavy rains this summer were responsible for the miserable harvest this year) or to ascribe responsibility to a certain role (e.g., the responsibility of a politician is the welfare of the state). Responsibility has been further associated with accountability, moral obligations, trust, and reliance (e.g., Winter, 1992; Winter and Barenbaum, 1985). The most common notion of responsibility, derived from legal studies, is centred on the liability model of responsibility<sup>3</sup> (Hart, 1968; see critically, Young, 2011). On the basis of the liability model, ‘one assigns responsibility to particular agents whose actions can be shown to be causally connected to the circumstances for which responsibility is sought’ (Young, 2011, p. 97). This extends also to common notions of moral responsibility, according to which being held morally responsible means being blameworthy for what one has done (Young, 2011).

However, the responsibility that various stakeholders demand of business managers goes beyond mere liability and the direct causal attribution of praise or blame; for instance, certain societal groups hold business leaders responsible for the behaviour of the suppliers of their companies in developing countries or for allowing their companies to contribute to

climate change. In these cases, multinational corporations (MNCs) are not directly responsible for the working conditions at their suppliers' factories in a liability sense, because they do not produce these conditions directly. Similarly, no single firm is causing the extent of pollution that will result in global warming, so it is not possible to identify a single perpetrator that could be held liable for causing climate change. However, contributing to pollution is nonetheless considered unethical business conduct by a growing number of people.

What is needed to address the above identified limitations of leadership research is an understanding of responsibility that reflects the complexities and challenges of the global business environment (see, e.g., Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Voegtlin et al., 2012). The questions for what and toward whom leaders are responsible relate to the increasing scope of responsibility that is demanded from business leaders.

The 'social connection' theory of responsibility meets these criteria (Young, 2004, 2006, 2011). Viewing responsibility as a social connection suggests that agents can be held responsible for their actions not only where a direct causal link can be established between an action and an outcome (direct liability), but also in cases where these links are indirect. As Young argues, those who 'contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices' (Young, 2011, p. 137). Young demands that those agents who have the resources and power to remedy structural injustices assume responsibility for them (see also, Jonas, 1979). In a similar vein, Maak and Pless (2009) argue that business leaders have an extended responsibility to engage with social and environmental problems, because they are privileged and have the power and potential to initiate successful changes. This is not simply a normative claim; it reflects the current business reality: many MNCs, for instance, take responsibility for what their suppliers do, engage in pollution prevention over and above compulsory regulatory requirements, and assume political roles where the state does not or cannot guarantee fundamental services, such

as building infrastructure or providing education and drinking water (Kaul et al., 2003; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011).

Young differentiates on the basis of five distinctions between her reasoning for proactive responsibility from the prevailing view of responsibility as liability. In her view, responsibility requires ‘not isolating’ moral agents and ‘judging background conditions’; also, in her approach, responsibility is ‘more forward-looking than backward-looking’, ‘shared’, and ‘discharged only through collective action’ (Young, 2006, 2011). The first distinction, i.e. that moral agents should not be isolated, is an implicit criticism of the common understanding of responsibility as liability, which aims to ‘mark out and isolate those responsible’ (Young, 2011, p. 105), even if the causal attribution of responsibility is often not possible in a complex world where many actors are responsible for producing or sustaining unjust conditions. The second distinction, that the concept of responsibility requires ‘judging background conditions’, suggests that the morally accepted baseline assumptions and structures in a society should be critically questioned if they are deemed unethical. That responsibility is ‘forward-looking’ is another criticism of the view of responsibility as liability, which ascribes responsibility retrospectively, in an attempt to hold accountable whoever caused an incident. Young argues that responsibility should be understood as more proactive and forward-looking than it currently is for structural injustices to be remedied. The fourth aspect, ‘shared responsibility’, means that all those who contribute to structural injustices ‘share responsibility for those harms’ (Young, 2011, p. 109) and the fifth aspect implies that, because responsibility is shared, these structural injustices can only be ‘discharged through collective action’ by those involved in causing or perpetuating the injustice.

On the whole, building on such an understanding of responsibility grounded in a theory of social justice can help to take into account the stakeholders’ expectations of corporations and their leaders with regard to responsibility. However, while Young takes a macro-view of social injustices in a global economy to define the scope of responsibility, this

paper argues that the aspects that Young identified can also be transferred to the micro-level of leadership. To develop a responsibility orientation for leadership, these aspects can be translated into four dimensions. More specifically: (1) responsibility means not isolating perpetrators, (2) responsibility means critically evaluating the prevailing rules and moral norms, (3) responsibility is forward-looking rather than backward-looking, and (4) responsibility is shared and requires collective action for problem-solving. Young's idea of 'judging background conditions' is rephrased as 'critically evaluating prevailing rules and moral norms'; this reflects the argument that leaders have to deal not only with the background conditions of the societal context, but also with the rules and norms within their organization. In addition, it addresses more explicitly the limiting view that ethical leadership depends on the prevailing moral norms in a specific context. Finally, 'shared responsibility' and 'collective action' are summarized in one dimension, which reflects the idea that responsible leadership will only be successful if it can foster collective action among those who share responsibility. These dimensions of responsibility are based on an understanding of leadership as Fairhurst (2007, p. 6) defines it:

Leadership is a process of influence and meaning management among actors that advances a task or goal. [...] The focus is on leadership process, not leader communication alone, in contrast to heroic leadership models [...]. Finally, leadership as influence and meaning management need not be performed by only one individual appointed a given role; it may shift and distribute itself among several organizational members.

In the following, the dimensions of responsible leadership are further explained and their value with regard to the limitations of current approaches to ethical and responsible leadership is pointed out.



### *Not isolating the leader*

Not isolating the perpetrator means that in today's business world it is often very difficult to hold single individuals responsible for unethical behaviour, especially when this behaviour contributes to broader social injustices. However, ethical leadership research treats leaders as if they are isolated from the organizational environment, focusing predominantly on the leader–employee relationship (see critically, Pless and Maak, 2011; Waldman and Galvin, 2008). Thus, there is a strong tendency to isolate individual leaders and hold them accountable for their direct impact on the ethical behaviour or wrongdoing of employees. However, it is not always possible to single out one person and hold him or her responsible for ensuring that ethical practices are implemented (as, for example, in cases of systemic corruption); moreover, the tendency to isolate individuals in this manner can lead to the habit of searching for scapegoats to blame for unethical outcomes to which others have also contributed. Furthermore, the tendency to isolate single leaders includes the risk of shutting out the complexity of a leader's decision-making; this, however, can have severe negative impacts, not only on a leaders' followers, but also on the organizational environment.

Business leaders are increasingly being held accountable for the impact of their decisions on society and the environment (e.g., for polluting the environment, for outsourcing work or downsizing, for disregarding community concerns, for exploiting workers in developing countries). These are complex issues and it is often impossible to identify individual actors as primarily responsible for their outcomes, as many actors contribute to these. In view of this complexity, adding the dimension of responsibility to the concept of leadership means that leaders can be held responsible for their actions even when their impact extends beyond the organizational boundaries and accountable to a broader range of organizational stakeholders (Maak and Pless, 2006). Moreover, the legitimate interests of stakeholders can be an indication of desirable ethical outcomes.

### *Critically evaluating prevailing societal norms, rules, and conventions*

The liability model of responsibility is based on identifying whose actions have an outcome that is deemed unethical according to prevailing societal norms, rules, and conventions. This principle is inherent also in the understanding of ethical leadership, as ethical leaders are evaluated on the basis of whether they exhibit ‘normatively appropriate conduct’, which is oriented to what is considered ethical in a given social environment. However, especially in the global business environment, there are multiple and often conflicting norms and some companies operate in states where the rule of law is inadequate. As a result, in many situations there may be no adequate or clearly articulated norms to guide ethical decision-making (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Moreover, the prevailing culture within an organization may be unethical and behaving according to what is perceived as acceptable may actually be wrong (consider, for example, the Siemens scandal, which indicated a strong implicit culture of tolerating corrupt behaviour in the company; see, Gebhardt and Müller-Seitz, 2011).

Therefore, adding a responsibility dimension to the concept of leadership that extends beyond mere liability means that leaders will be expected to critically evaluate local societal or organizational conditions and, wherever laws and regulations are flawed or nonexistent, go beyond what these require them to do; it also means that leaders will be expected to speak up when the organizational culture condones unethical practices. Such an informed moral judgment helps to address the limitations of ethical leadership being bound to currently prevailing norms of normatively appropriate behaviour; at the same time, being able to critically judge prevailing norms implies that leaders will be expected to possess qualities beyond those that are currently being associated with ethical or responsible leadership. These qualities will be discussed in the course of the paper.

### *Forward-looking rather than backward-looking*

Responsibility from the ‘social connection’ perspective implies a forward-looking rather than backward-looking responsibility orientation. The backward-looking approach to responsibility as liability is focused on holding perpetrators accountable for what they have done after an incident (e.g., on searching for someone to blame following a corporate scandal), while a forward-looking approach implies that leaders should try to prevent accidents and scandals. This means that leaders should anticipate the consequences of their decisions, orient their thinking to the long term, and consider the potentially negative impact of doing business on those possibly affected, including the society and the environment (Voegtlin et al., 2012). The interviews reported in the following will show that these elements are much called for by practitioners; however, they do not yet form an explicit part of current ethical leadership conceptualizations.

### *Shared responsibility and collective problem-solving*

The ‘social connection’ model puts forth the argument that ‘all those who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice *share responsibility* for those harms’ (Young, 2011, p. 109; emphasis added). Young argued furthermore that although this is a personal responsibility, it is not carried by one person alone: actors who contribute collectively to an injustice (such as global pollution, or unjust working conditions in developing countries), bear the same responsibility for remedying it.

Integrating the notion of shared responsibility into the concept of leadership has important implications. While the current concepts of ethical and responsible leadership place the burden of moral conduct only on the leader, sharing responsibility makes leadership a collective effort. In this case, a breach of ethical conduct does not mean searching for a scapegoat, but rather looking for shared problem solving. Regarding responsible leadership as shared also means that different parties assume leadership roles in the search for common

solutions. Furthermore, considering responsibility as shared places a different emphasis on ethical decision-making, as every party affected by a decision can be regarded as part of the solution. Problem-solving becomes based on dialogue with stakeholders. In that respect, responsible leadership often does not become visible until business representatives and stakeholders start to communicate with each other (Clifton, 2014; Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014). Especially when companies address broader societal questions in communication with their stakeholders, the latter can contribute their knowledge and specific competencies to the process of problem-solving, thereby assuming leadership roles. For example, NGO representatives can act as coaches, visionaries, or experts, while organizational leaders may occupy roles such as initiator and moderator of stakeholder dialogues. Leadership shifts from an exclusive quality of the 'leader' to a shared process of meaning-management among actors (Fairhurst, 2007; Tourish, 2014).

Finally, responsibility means helping to remedy structural injustices. To eliminate structurally unjust conditions, it is necessary to mobilize collective action, because no single person or entity is responsible for creating such conditions (Young, 2004, 2006). This notion of responsible leadership can help to emphasize that collective problem-solving is necessary in a global business environment in order to achieve successful and positive change. The current concept of ethical leadership focuses on the ethical authority of the leader, who is presumed to know what is right and wrong and who can enforce these behaviours on others. A collective problem-solving approach in contrast, emphasizes an understanding of responsible leadership that is about encouraging participation among stakeholders and weighing and balancing their legitimate claims. Leaders emerge as those who use their influence to initiate and moderate dialogues (Voegtlin et al., 2012). Responsible leadership thereby offers the possibility to uncover mutually beneficial solutions for all stakeholders engaged in the problem-solving process (Austin, 2006). Table 1 displays the new aspects of a responsibility orientation for leadership.

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To summarize, adding a responsibility orientation to the concept of leadership contributes to leadership research in several ways: it introduces a stakeholder view of leadership, a critical view of prevailing practices, a long-term orientation towards desirable ethical goals, the notion of shared leadership, and, finally, an emphasis on collective problem-solving through communication. Extending leadership research in this direction thereby helps to address the limitations of ethical leadership identified earlier: first, this approach can underpin a theory of leadership based on responsibility; second, it can help specify the kind of leadership behaviour that is desirable and normatively appropriate (i.e., leaders have the responsibility to help remedy the unjust conditions to which they are contributing), third, it identifies the consequences of leadership that extend beyond the leader–follower relationship and relate to broader societal concerns (uncovered through communication with stakeholders), finally, it de-centralizes the focus on the leader by challenging the assumption that the leader is the only one able to solve ethical problems. Furthermore, this approach enriches the ongoing discussion on responsible leadership by providing a comprehensive definition of responsibility on the part of leaders, linking responsible leadership with the ability to critically evaluate norms and rules, and regarding responsible leadership as a shared endeavour. In the following, this view will be illustrated through a discussion of the challenges responsible leaders face.

**Perceptions from managerial practice: Views on responsible leadership from business managers and NGO representatives**

The perceptions of responsible leadership presented below derive from in-depth interviews with international leaders working in their organizations' CSR departments and with NGO representatives. The case study is used to examine the central aspects of responsibility in a

specific context. It is important not merely to theorize on the scope of responsibility, but to show how it is reflected in the concerns of practitioners and in their expectations of responsible leadership. Especially views from outside the organization (e.g., from the perspective of NGOs) can help to foster understanding of the difficulties of responsible leadership in the context of global business. The purpose of the qualitative investigation that was undertaken for this study was to make responsible leadership more tangible by providing examples of what it means to be responsible and by identifying the main challenges that can hinder its practical applicability. It is important to note that the aim of the interviews was to exemplify and not to validate this present approach.

#### *Research context and data collection*

The case study focuses on the banking sector, which was chosen for the following reasons: this sector is dominated by both a strong profit motive and shareholder orientation. The prevalent usage of business language and the focus on shareholders lend themselves to contrasting this view to the notion of responsible leadership. Furthermore, banks are increasingly becoming the focus of critical NGOs and are accused of operations and actions for which they are not directly responsible (e.g., financing mountaintop-removal projects in the US or supporting the controversial production of palm oil in Indonesia). Such criticism goes even further than the demands that MNCs be accountable for the social responsibility of their suppliers and makes it an interesting industry in which to study the scope of responsibility that business representatives are expected to assume. These points make it especially promising to study responsible leadership in the banking sector as a rather extreme environment and to examine how the CSR department within such an environment copes with the growing demands and accusations of external stakeholders while internally being confronted with a strong business logic.

Eleven individual, confidential interviews were conducted with international executives working in the CSR department of two Swiss multinational banks and with representatives of two NGOs that interact specifically with these MNCs. The interviewees worked in departments around the globe. Details on the interviewees are displayed in Table 2.

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Following an interview protocol, face-to-face interviews were conducted in which the participants were invited to share their experiences and opinions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Eisenhardt, 1989). The length of the interviews was between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, internal documents provided by the interview partners and publicly available documents found on the homepages of the studied organizations (both banks and NGOs) were obtained. This is also, to the best of the author's knowledge, the first study to ask NGO representatives what they consider ethical or responsible leadership.

#### *Identifying the challenges of responsible leadership*

The results from the qualitative investigation are used to illustrate what the theoretically identified dimensions of responsibility mean in the context of leadership in and of banks. The following discussion is structured alongside the dimensions of responsibility.

(1) *Not isolating the leader*: the interviewees confirmed that the scope of the business leaders' responsibility extends beyond the boundaries of the organization. Leaders are increasingly held responsible for the broader social and environmental implications of their organization's conduct. They have to justify their position in exchanges with different stakeholders – for instance, in negotiations with NGOs, when they are admonished to enforce stricter guidelines of business conduct on their suppliers, or when they are criticized or questioned by (social) investors or customers.

However, the interview results also indicate that the stakeholder view of leadership entails certain challenges, which spotlight what the (theoretically defined) scope of a leader's responsibility involves in practice. Among the challenges mentioned was the difficulty of handling different interests and agendas. Leaders need to have realistic expectations when they interact with stakeholders and stakeholder engagement was mentioned to be a time-consuming process. Furthermore, getting the attention of employees and managers when it comes to ethical issues and overcoming the dominance of short-term thinking were regarded as difficult tasks (one interviewee noted that the main obstacles to responsible leadership in the financial sector still lie in the shareholder-driven agenda of businesses).

Finally, the hierarchical position was mentioned as an important aspect for successful stakeholder engagement. Responsible leadership was often associated with the top management. The higher the leader's position in the hierarchy, the greater the scope of his or her responsibility. Interviewees also mentioned that securing the CEO's commitment to social and environmental issues is essential for positive change and at the same time a considerable challenge (see Table 3).

(2) *Responsible leadership means critically judging prevailing rules and moral norms:* in response to the question 'how do you understand the term "responsible leadership"?', one of the interviewees replied in a way that captures the main argument of the social connection model of responsibility:

[Responsible leadership] is a vague term that would mean a lot of different things to different people, but in my mind, you know at this moment in time, there are a lot of problems facing society, and [...] the public sector doesn't really seem capable of really effectively addressing these problems, at least on its own. And so there is a kind of a conventional wisdom that businesses have to be meaningfully engaged in solving these social problems [...]. And there's just a shifting expectation that industry has the resources, the innovation, the influence to help solve these problems and if industry isn't involved and we just put it all off on the public sector, then we'll never get the solutions. (Business representative)

This quotation indicates that business representatives are aware that the public sector cannot solve pressing societal problems on its own and that, in this case, banks can play an



important role in the effort to remedy unjust conditions. The interviewee associates business leaders' responsibility with a broader notion of social responsibility similar to the theoretically identified scope of responsibility. In a similar vein, the interviewees emphasized that responsible leadership means doing more than the law requires (see quotations in Table 3). Thus, there is some indication that practitioners value leaders who critically evaluate the conditions that characterize a situation and help to bring forth positive and ethical change.

With regard to that, the interviewees mentioned several characteristics in a leader that they associated with responsible leadership. Responsible leadership was associated with having a clear set of values and ethical standards, being able to communicate effectively, having a long-term vision, knowing when to make concessions, achieving positive change, but also being emotionally balanced, and showing empathy:

Responsibility means for me [...] weighing carefully the consequences of one's actions and the decisions one makes, and that one is ready to stand by one's decision if things go well, but especially if they don't go well. That goes in the direction of being accountable. What also belongs to responsibility is being 'approachable,' because one has to consider a wide array of aspects and perhaps to include different opinions. (Business representative)

Finally, moral courage is necessary in order to do more than what the law requires.

Responsible leadership:

requires more thought, more judgment, and also requires, in some cases, walking away from business opportunities, where notwithstanding the fact that you are fully compliant with the requirements, you feel that the spirit of these requirements is being violated. You don't have to walk away, but you should walk away. And that takes a huge amount of responsible leadership. (Business representative)

(3) *Responsible leadership means being forward-looking*: the interviews revealed that looking forward is considered a highly important aspect of leadership in the financial sector. Most interviewees mentioned that a responsibility orientation requires long-term thinking. However, while looking forward was regarded as necessary, at the same time it was regarded as one of the challenges of leadership (see also Table 3):

Leadership, starting at the very top, that is really, CEOs; from my point of view, there are too few CEOs in the financial sector who have the courage to make long-term decisions. [...] [This, however, is] a precondition for being able to even begin to talk about sustainability. (NGO representative)

The discussion about forward-looking leadership revolved primarily around the challenge of managing an economic and social logic at the same time. Business leaders who are exposed to different stakeholder demands see themselves as translators between different languages. Not only business representatives, but also NGO representatives view their influence as dependent on speaking the same ‘language’.

(4) *Effective responsible leadership is shared leadership and encourages collective problem solving*: when the interviewed managers were asked what an ideal stakeholder dialogue consisted in, both business and NGO representatives stressed the value of collaboration. However, both groups of interviewees also emphasized that collaboration and dialogue do not mean having all parties meet just once to discuss an issue. One NGO representative even saw dialogue sometimes as an excuse for business not to engage in substantive action:

Actually, what I don’t like that much are ‘stakeholder dialogues.’ Because, in this case, the parties have spoken with another and it was nice – and then everybody leaves and the bank can write in its sustainability report that they had a stakeholder dialogue. (NGO representative)

The interviewees mentioned that successful collaboration that leads to collective problem-solving needs a continuous exchange between the different parties. They also pointed out that such a successful exchange depends on several things, such as transparency, openness, valuing the positions of others, being well informed, as well as being willing to let others take the lead if they have the expertise (e.g., banks rely on the expertise of NGOs to help them solve environmental questions; see quotations in Table 3). Collective problem-solving is based on such a successful communication and leadership in such a setting has a strong participative component (e.g., valuing the opinions of others, inviting all affected parties to take part, fostering collaboration). This kind of collaboration resembles what Buber has called genuine dialogue ‘where each of the participants has in mind the other or others’

and turns to them to establish mutual relations (Burber, 2002, p. 22; cited in Ashman and Lawler, 2008, p. 262).

Finally, collective problem-solving was also associated with participants occupying different leadership roles. Shared leadership can help make exchanges between the organization and various stakeholders successful and their results mutually beneficial by enabling all parties to contribute their expertise to the dialogue. The challenges of shared responsible leadership and collective problem-solving are similar to those associated with having a successful dialogue. The interviewees mentioned, for example, time pressure as an obstacle to mutually beneficial exchanges with stakeholders; they also mentioned perspective-taking, i.e. the ‘cognitive capacity to consider the world from another individual’s viewpoint’ (Galinsky et al., 2008, p. 378; Jones, 2014). Cultural differences were another obstacle (this was mentioned especially by people responsible for regions that have a very different culture from that of the company’s home country). Finally, being pushed into the role of a ‘translator’ emerged during the interviews as a main challenge for being perceived as a credible and responsible leader. Both business managers and NGO representatives mentioned that leaders need to be able to speak different ‘languages’ when they communicate with internal stakeholders, such as the management, and external stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, or NGOs:

It is a central concern of ours, or from my work, to really understand the business model of the banks. [We need] to find a common language between us, because it is often the case that NGOs and the financial industry speak completely different languages. (NGO representative)

If business leaders want to respond to the demands of external stakeholders responsibly and to achieve positive change, they have to be able to ‘translate’ these demands – i.e. to make them comprehensible to the management – in order to gain the management’s attention, and to communicate the response of the company back to the external stakeholders. One aspect of such a translation some interviewees mentioned was the need to make the

business case if people in the CSR department want to get the attention of top management for their concerns. To ‘translate’ the company’s response back to NGOs, the people in charge need to frame it according to a social logic that demonstrates how the company proposes to promote social welfare.

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## **Discussion**

The construct of ethical leadership is both timely and needed and especially the social scientific study of ethical leadership has produced a significant body of knowledge that contributes to the understanding of how ethical leaders can improve organizational work life (see, e.g., Brown and Trevino, 2006; Jordan et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 2012; Piccolo et al., 2010). An important part of ethical leadership is to discipline unethical behaviour, reward ethical behaviour, and communicate high ethical standards to employees. Ethical leaders have a clear set of values and employees trust them and regard them as desirable role models (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Trevino et al., 2000, 2003). However, the main argument in this paper is that, although these tasks and qualities are necessary, they are not sufficient, as social responsibility considerations are important aspects that today’s business leaders need to take into account. Yet, responsibility has been widely overlooked in research on leadership.

In view of this, one of this article’s main contributions to general research on leadership ethics is that it shows why the notion of responsibility is an important aspect of leadership. Furthermore, the article provides a comprehensive and theory-driven understanding of responsible leadership based on four dimensions of responsibility: (1) the leader is not isolated as the sole agent of responsibility, (2) the leader has the ability to critically evaluate the prevailing norms and rules, (3) leadership is forward-looking, and (4) leadership is shared and involves collective problem-solving. These dimensions of

responsibility were illustrated through qualitative interviews with company managers and NGO representatives.

This article thereby also extends the research on responsible leadership (see, e.g., Doh, Stumpf, and Tymon, 2011; Pless et al., 2012; Waldman and Siegel, 2008) in that it provides detail to the understanding of leaders' responsibility, discusses abilities necessary for being a responsible leader (like perspective-taking and moral courage), identifies new aspects for the leadership process (responsible leadership as shared leadership), provides examples of practitioners' views on responsibility, including those of NGO representatives, and, finally, identifies challenges for such leadership.

The orientation towards responsibility proposed in this article has several implications for leadership in organizations as well as for organizational conditions that can facilitate responsible leadership. First, the notion of 'responsibility' derived from the social connection model implies that leaders need to have a certain degree of ethical literacy in order to make informed judgments about moral expectations in a particular environment (Pless et al., 2011). An important aspect of such ethical literacy is the leader's ability to put aside his or her own view and to consider the perspective of those potentially affected by a particular decision. This ideal 'role taking' is a key element of most ethical theories. It means judging ethical decisions from a morally impartial point of view, thereby acknowledging the legitimate positions and arguments of those possibly affected by a decision (see, e.g., Habermas, 1996).

Thus, organizational attempts to provide stricter guidelines for ethical conduct through codes of conduct or tightening monitoring and compliance mechanisms will not enable employees to develop such an ethical literacy, but will facilitate 'normatively appropriate conduct' according to pre-defined expectations. Instead, an organization that wants to foster responsible leadership could provide space for critical thought, for example by facilitating a culture of openness and dialogue, where employees feel encouraged to discuss sensitive topics with their supervisors and colleagues. Companies can also encourage reflective ethical

decision making through targeted ethics trainings. The ethics training can be tailored to the specific requirements of a position in the organization, considering also the local and cultural context where the employees work. The training might contain stories of how colleagues have dealt with delicate issues in similar situations and provide imaginative solutions on how to deal with conflicting norms. Moreover, the commitment of top management was identified as an important trigger for the responsible engagement with social and environmental topics. Therefore, fostering CEO responsible leadership seems decisive (Maak et al., 2014). As many CEOs have a strong sense of fiduciary duty toward the owners of their company, one policy implication for publicly listed companies would be to encourage responsible investing that puts an emphasis on CSR topics.

Furthermore, responsible leadership means not isolating the leader and has a forward-looking orientation. Not isolating the leader would imply that organizations establish accountability mechanisms that create collective responsibility expectations and preclude the quick search for scapegoats. The forward-looking orientation relates responsible leadership to risk management, i.e., to a prospective understanding of responsibility that aims to minimize social and environmental risks. Recent research on corporate governance provides ideas on how to mitigate the search for scapegoats and to foster forward-looking risk management. Filatotchev and Nakajima (2014) argue that corporate governance that focuses on strategic, rather than financial controls, shifts accountability to stakeholders beyond shareholders and incentivises long-term thinking. Such governance favours large block shareholding with a strong focus on long-term institutional investors, establishes non-hierarchical systems of communication and accountability to external constituencies, and creates incentives to contribute to the triple bottom line of social, environmental and financial performance (Filatotchev and Nakajima, 2014). As a case in point, the CSR department of one of the interviewed banks had the mandate to manage the bank's reputational risks and, as a consequence, the CSR managers acted as responsible leaders who tried to promote a long-

term risk mentality among their colleagues. Similarly, Scherer et al. (2013a) suggest democratizing corporate governance by integrating stakeholders in organizational decision making. They refer to the governance structure at Lafarge, a major producer of building materials, to illustrate their arguments and report for instance, that the company established a standing stakeholder panel of ten experts that meets biannually with the executive committee and the CEO (Scherer et al. 2013a). Such panels might provide room for responsible leadership to emerge.

Finally, shared leadership and collective problem-solving are a decisive part of responsible leadership and underpin its practical relevance. If all the affected parties can agree on a solution and are willing to engage in collective problem-solving, the moral legitimacy of the outcome will be secured, because everybody is part of the process and thus responsible for the outcome (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). In that sense, responsible leadership can provide guidance to overburdened leaders who are faced with heterogeneous and often morally conflicting demands. Becoming aware of the demands of different stakeholders enables leaders to find out what outcomes the company's constituents consider ethically desirable, because these demands reflect to a certain extent the aggregated opinions of important societal groups.

Shared leadership also helps preclude the impression of colonization or imperialism; that is, the impression that leaders who may have the best intentions, try nonetheless to establish universally their viewpoints or their beliefs about what is right and wrong without consulting those affected. Placing the burden of responsibility solely on the business leader rests on the implicit premise that actors who make an ethical decision can arbitrarily assume the position of any other possibly affected party and decide what is best for all parties involved (Tugendhat, 1993). However, as research on CSR shows, Western-based CSR practices are sometimes perceived as patronizing and as a new form of Western imperialism in developing countries (Khan and Lund-Thomsen, 2011). Shared leadership can guarantee

that stakeholders are considered equals and their voices are heard. This approach emphasizes leadership as a communicative process through which it is possible to create shared meaning among stakeholders (Ashman and Lawler, 2008; Tourish, 2014).

As the interviewees indicated, the challenge of collective problem-solving is to find a common language and to accommodate conflicting goals. In this regard, responsible leadership requires dealing with paradoxes and relates to the management of complexity (Denison et al., 1995; Hooijberg et al., 1997). For instance, responsible leaders might need to be able to handle an economic and a social logic simultaneously, which presents a cognitive effort, and to display these often contradictory logics in their behaviour and decision making. Thus, responsible leaders require cognitive, relational, and behavioral capacities to ‘adjust [the] behavioral responses to diverse role demands’ (Hannah et al., 2013, p. 393) to deal successfully with the relational complexity that comes with an extended stakeholder engagement. Cognitive complexity enables leaders to recognize and comprehend various interests and to deal with a greater multitude of news and information; relational complexity comprises the ability to communicate and negotiate with different groups and is based on emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity; behavioral complexity is the capacity to draw on a broad behavioral repertoire, including different leadership roles and to display these different roles in interactions with diverse stakeholders and to switch between (sometimes conflicting) roles, depending on the setting or situation (Maak et al., 2014; Hooijberg et al., 1997; Hannah et al., 2013). Denison et al. (1995) showed that leaders who possess a higher capacity for behavioural complexity and can perform multiple and contradictory roles simultaneously are more effective; yet, they might also be able to act more responsibly.

Organizations can try to foster individual capacities to deal with complexity by providing training and development opportunities, for instance through service-learning programs which involve sending “participants in teams to developing countries to work in cross-sector partnerships with NGOs, social entrepreneurs, or international organizations”



(Pless et al., 2011, p. 237). Alternatively, such capacities can be encouraged through the creation of a stimulating organizational context, including HR policies, “such as the selection of open-minded people, personal training in situations of ambiguity and conflict, and incentive systems that endorse reflective critique” (Scherer et al., 2013b, p. 277). Future research could try to shed more light into the personal characteristics and abilities as well as the organizational conditions that can facilitate these aspects of responsible leadership.

Overall, the conception of responsible leadership provides possibilities for several future research directions. Research can try to further refine responsible leadership by discussing its specific antecedents and outcomes. A second task would be to theorize on and attempt to measure empirically the social and environmental impact of responsible leadership within and beyond the organization. The considerations on leaders’ responsibility suggest that leadership research should pay more attention to outcomes like stakeholder trust, organizational reputation, organizational legitimacy, and the broader social and environmental consequences of leadership behaviour and decision-making.

Furthermore, empirical research can try to identify enabling conditions for responsible leadership. This might include the search for individual characteristics that enable individuals to develop a sense of responsibility, like the ability to empathize with others or the mental capacity for perspective taking, but also individuals’ moral identity and their capacity for dealing with complexity. Experimental designs that allow researchers to draw causal inferences would be a suitable way to analyse these antecedents of responsible leadership (Antonakis et al., 2010).

Apart from individual antecedents, research could investigate the process of collective-problems solving and the role of responsible leadership therein. This research might focus on sensemaking and the role of leadership as meaning management with regard to social and environmental challenges (Hahn et al., 2014; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Research might focus on how leadership emerges and is distributed or shared among several stakeholders

within and outside the organization and investigate questions like: how and when (under what conditions) do responsible leaders emerge? What is the role of responsible leadership in negotiating socially or environmentally responsible business practices? How and when does responsible leadership lead to positive social change? Research focusing on these topics could rely more strongly on qualitative, longitudinal studies and methodologies.

Finally, this article provides several starting points that will enable researchers to conceptualize the relationship between responsible and ethical leadership in further detail. While ethical leadership research has a leader centric view and a strong focus on internal ethics management, research on responsible leadership complements ethical leadership by focussing on considerations of an extended social and environmental responsibility of business leaders' decision making. Responsible leadership shifts the focus towards communication, shared responsibility, and collective problem-solving with the participation of stakeholders. Consequently, both ethical and responsible leadership can be considered as important complements to 'good' leadership in the sense that the first primarily defines the necessary qualities of a 'good' leader, while the second incorporates in 'good' leadership the procedural aspect of ethical decision making through the successful engagement with stakeholders. Future research could theorize further on the interrelation between ethics and responsibility, by examining, for example, whether leaders can be ethical without being responsible or vice versa.

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**Table 1.** Responsible leadership as social connection.

<b>Responsibility dimensions</b>	<b>Implications for leadership</b>
Not isolating the leader	Responsible leadership should be regarded as an interaction between leader and stakeholders
Critically evaluating prevailing societal norms, rules and conventions	Responsible leadership means exceeding legal requirements and compliance guidelines when these are deemed wrong or insufficient  Responsible leaders have the ethical literacy to critically assess moral norms
Forward-looking	Responsible leaders think about the broader social and environmental consequences of their company's operation and about the long-term benefits for the company
Shared responsibility and collective problem-solving	Responsible leadership does not centre on the manager; various parties may assume important leadership roles to achieve legitimate solutions  Responsible leadership is not simply transactional; it also has a strong consensus-oriented, participative component

**Table 2.** Overview of interviewed persons.

	<b>Interviewed person</b>	<b>Function and work experience</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Language of interview</b>
1	Corporate Head Sustainability Affairs	Global Headquarters; Corporate Function	Global Swiss Bank	English
2	Deputy Head Sustainability Affairs	Global Headquarters; Corporate Function	Global Swiss Bank	German
3	Regional Head Sustainability Affairs Asia Pacific	Asia-Pacific Region; Bureau in Hong Kong	Global Swiss Bank	English
4	Regional Head Sustainability Affairs Europe, Middle East, and Africa	Europe, Middle East, and Africa; Bureau in the UK	Global Swiss Bank	English
5	Regional Head Sustainability Affairs Americas	Americas; Bureau in the US	Global Swiss Bank	English
6	Team Member Corporate Office Sustainable Risk Affairs	Global Headquarters; Corporate Function	Global Swiss Bank	English
7	Team Member Corporate Office Sustainable Risk Affairs	Global Headquarters; Corporate Function	Global Swiss Bank	German
8	Corporate Responsibility Management	Global Headquarters; Corporate Function	Global Swiss Bank	German
9	Executive board member of regional NGO office	Responsible for dialogue with banks; interaction with companies, NGOs, and affected parties around the world; Bureau in Switzerland	Regional NGO	German
10	Part of regional NGO office	Responsible for dialogue with banks; interaction with companies, NGOs, and affected parties around the world; Bureau in Switzerland	Global NGO	German
11	Part of regional NGO office	Manages responsible leadership education; interaction with companies, NGOs, and affected parties around the world; Bureau in Switzerland	Global NGO	English

**Table 3.** Illustrations of the responsibility dimensions and challenges for responsible leadership.

Responsibility dimensions	Extensions to the concept of ethical leadership	Challenges for responsible leaders	Exemplary Quotations
Not isolating the leader	Responsible leadership should be regarded as an interaction between leader and stakeholders	Handling different interests and agendas; dominance of shareholder-driven agenda	<p>We have very strong stakeholder expectations [...] in Europe.</p> <p>That means, for the particular situation or question, involving all relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>[Responsible leadership is] a difficult balance in many instances, but a balance that is required. Ultimately, I would argue that, in the end, irresponsible leadership, in other words, leadership that is all about generating revenue without taking into consideration or carefully managing environmental and social issues, is in the long run bad for shareholders. (Business Representative)</p>
		Difficulty to get attention for ethical issues; support from top management	<p>The harder part may be to get it down into the organization, but the good thing is, that when people on top, or in the most senior positions are on board, then it's much easier to get it down into the organization</p> <p>You analyse which ones are doing the best work on CSR, better than anyone else. There is one fact that distinguishes all of the companies that are doing the leadership work, that are doing the most responsible performance. It's the companies who have CEO engagement. It's when the CEO is personally committed, it makes all the difference. And if the CEO has not, it's a way of creating almost kind of a barrier, like a glass ceiling, it's just how far you can take it.</p>
		Critically evaluating prevailing societal norms, rules and conventions	Responsible leadership means exceeding legal requirements and compliance guidelines when these are deemed wrong or insufficient
	Responsible leaders have the ethical literacy to critically assess moral norms	<p>There is the focus not only on complying with the letter of the regulation, but also with the spirit of the regulation, and that's a much more difficult thing.</p>	

	Making informed ethical judgments	We have very strong stakeholder expectations [...] in Europe. On the other hand, I and my business colleagues are working in countries like Indonesia or Mongolia or wherever, and obviously there's a strong push to conclude a transaction, to get a deal done. And in that case it requires that leadership in the region is making sure that we're not rushing blindly at the situations, so in exposing ourselves to business risk or reputational risk. That we're being responsible in doing things, and what's reasonable in an appropriate manner.
	Displaying moral courage	When a CEO then says, I want that this bank still has the license to operate in 20 years, that is, the legitimacy, then it needs a lot of courage and personal risk, it is a personal risk that he bears, if the shareholder believe him that or not.
Forward-looking	Responsible leaders think about the broader social and environmental consequences of their company's operation and about the long-term benefits for the company	Well for me, [responsible leadership] means long term. Leadership really as view to the long term. Responsibility I see as an obligation that goes along with your rights. So to me rights and responsibility are linked. So you have the right to make a lot of money in an economy but also you have responsibility to make sure you don't exhaust resources beyond a sustainable point. So to me a responsible leader is one that can fulfil the aims of his company, to providing return for the shareholders but also to have an appreciation for what's going to be important to his business in 10, 20, 30 years' time. So he's not just managing for the next quarters returns or the next years returns, it's to keep a business in business.
	Handling an economic and a social logic at the same time	We have to be profitable to be a responsible company. If we were not profitable and we went bankrupt, that would be very irresponsible to everyone, employees, customers, suppliers.
	Overcoming the strong shareholder focus on quarterly results	That one has long-term thoughts, which can in certain circumstances, mean to have higher costs in the short-term, in the sense of a long-term positive development of the company.
Shared responsibility and collective problem-solving	Responsible leadership does not centre on the manager; various parties may assume important leadership roles to achieve legitimate solutions  Responsible leadership is not simply transactional;	A useful stakeholder engagement would be a stakeholder engagement whereby all parties sit down, look at the common problem and say [...] what of a challenge is it, what's your expected [outcome], what common idea is [going] to fix that.  That means again, to involve all for a particular situation, question, or decision relevant to stakeholders. It must also be manageable. One has to do a certain selection: which themes will be affected by this decision, or what is relevant in this situation, who knows something about it? And then include these, who know something about it and who are going to feel the consequences.

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it also has a strong  
consensus-oriented,  
participative component

Being open for sharing  
responsibility

In America we choose to focus on product development. And we specifically prioritize the cultural sector, because [NGO name] brings a lot of insight to agriculture and we're trying to create an index scored on sustainable agriculture companies.

Collaboration rather than  
simple conversation

We [the NGO] have developed, together with a consulting firm, a common framework, with eight Swiss banks, together, to ask the question, do we really understand your business model and where environmental issues come to bear?

Achieving mutual  
beneficial change

I think ideal is, every time you have an exchange with someone, that both sides can understand the respective point of view of the other party and can work further together on that basis. Which means regularly, especially in our case, not having the same opinion, but at least that one really understands, or tries to understand, what the other side means and that one can adjust one's future actions accordingly.

Perspective taking;  
cultural differences

There are also factors that contribute unintentionally to the failure [of a dialogue]; these are again cultural [factors], different points of view or concepts. Misunderstandings that evolve, without mean intention, just because one insufficiently assumes the other's point of view. These are also reasons why it is difficult.

Leadership as translation  
between different  
stakeholder 'languages'

For me I think, I can get ashamed that we use the language of sustainability because still a lot of people who we do conservation with, they think we are 'tree huggers', whereas what we need to talk about really is [...] availability of resources. That's basically what matters. Clean air, clean water. You know that the materials that we need for the economy to function, that's what sustainability is, that's what we're talking about.

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Note: Some of the quotations are translated from interviews conducted in German.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Relativistic ethical theories, in contrast to universal approaches, assume that ethical norms cannot be justified universally. In other words, they suggest that ethical norms are not valid independently of their spatial and temporal context but are contingent on moral expectations in a specific context and as such cannot be determined a priori (Tugendhat, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> The term normative is used here as Donaldson and Dunfee (1994, p. 252) described it: ‘We use the term normative in the philosophic sense; it is a prescriptive rather than descriptive term. It provides guidance about actions or policies instead of describing them’. They add that ‘the philosophical sense is not hypothetical but “categorical”; it says, in effect, “Do this because it is the right thing to do”’ (both quotations: Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994, p. 252).

<sup>3</sup> Hart (1968), as one of the most influential scholars in legal philosophy in this regard, distinguished between four dimensions of responsibility: ‘causal responsibility’, ‘liability responsibility’, ‘role responsibility’, and ‘capacity responsibility’. *Causal* responsibility means holding someone responsible for an event or an outcome according to a causal connection between what that person has done and the event. *Liability* responsibility is connected to praise or blame (i.e. someone is held liable for a certain event that he or she caused). *Role* responsibility refers to a certain task or role that one is assigned or occupies, and the specific responsibilities this task or role involves. *Capacity* responsibility means that a person can only be held responsible or be assigned responsibility for something or someone if he or she possesses fully the faculties of understanding and reasoning and is in control of his or her conduct (for the dimensions of responsibility, see Hart, 1968, pp. 210-230).