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Why Cultural Intelligence Determines the Success of Sustainable Leadership: An Analysis with Recommended Actions for Companies

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This paper analyses cultural intelligence in the context of sustainable leadership and provides a comprehensive assessment of the synergies and benefits of integrating cultural intelligence into leadership.

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Cultural intelligence is a crucial key competence for promoting and improving sustainable leadership, as the majority of companies today operate in transnational value chains and increasingly have a culturally diverse personnel structure.

This paper analyses cultural intelligence in the context of sustainable leadership and provides a comprehensive assessment of the synergies and benefits of integrating cultural intelligence into leadership. This analysis focusses on economic and social aspects. Finally, concrete recommendations for action for companies to implement cultural intelligence in a sustainable leadership culture are presented.

The article emphasises the need to consider not only economic perspectives in leadership, but also amplifies social and ethical perspectives in connection with an inter-culturally intelligent ability and awareness to act in order to increase leadership success within and outside the company.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasingly globalized business world, characterised by dynamism and complexity, the concept of sustainable leadership is becoming absolutely important. This paradigm shift is driven not only by the growing awareness of environmental issues, political debates and initiatives, but also by economic considerations with regard to organisational stability, economic robustness and long-term business success. The growing pressure from legal requirements and societal expectations is further reinforcing this development (Bendell et al. 2017; Tideman et al 2013).

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is a key aspect for promoting and improving sustainable leadership. CQ is a concept that makes leadership behaviour demonstrably measurable in a culturally unfamiliar context. CQ can also be operationalised in such a way that this

essential competence can be learned and developed (Rockstuhl et al. 2011; van Dyne et al. 2012).

This paper is dedicated to the concept of sustainable leadership as well as to a comprehensive assessment of CQ and its integration into the context of sustainable leadership. Not only ecological, but also social and partly economic aspects are taken into account in order to create a holistic understanding.

Firstly the paper reviews the basics of sustainable leadership in order to shed light on definitions and characteristics and to explain the significance of this leadership philosophy for companies, the environment, the economy and society. The concept of CQ is then analysed in more detail by highlighting its relevance and impact in global business environments. Based on this, an analysis of how cultural intelligence can support sustainable leadership and what synergies exist between CQ and the principles of sustainable leadership will be performed.

Secondly, the integration of CQ into the Sustainable Leadership approach will be evaluated. In addition, the selected advantages of CQ in the context of sustainable leadership are analysed. Finally, practice-orientated recommendations for action for companies are presented.

Overall, the article emphasises the increasing need for management and leaders to consider not only economic goals but also social responsibility in connection with a deep intercultural understanding in the future. In an ever-changing global business environment, the findings presented provide a sound rationale for creating a sustainable and inclusive leadership culture.

II. SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

Sustainable leadership represents a paradigm shift in the way managers perceive their responsibilities and manage organisations. The definitional categorisation of sustainable leadership is multifaceted and subject to constant change as the demands on leadership change in a dynamic business environment (Gerard et al. 2017). The subsequent section presents various definitions of sustainable leadership in chronological order and identifies common core elements, principles and methods.

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According to Peter Senge (1990), sustainable leadership strives to create organisations that are not only successful in the short term, but also implement sustainable long term practices. Senge emphasises the importance of continuous learning and adaptability in order to meet the challenges of a constantly changing environment. Elkington (1997) integrates ecological, economic and social dimensions into his definition of sustainable leadership. He sees managers as key players who can achieve a positive impact on the environment, economy and society through their decisions. The triple bottom line - people, planet, profit - is at the centre of his approach. Avolio et al. (2004) focus on the personal responsibility of managers. They define sustainable leadership as a process in which managers empower their employees to achieve long-term goals by fostering a culture of trust, innovation and ethical decision making. Bass and Riggio (2006) highlight the need to integrate ethical principles in their definition. Sustainable leadership goes beyond short-term organisational goals and strives to develop ethically responsible leaders who promote long-term positive change. Marquardt (2011) draws attention to the development of leaders with regard to sustainable

practices. Sustainable leadership is seen as an evolutionary process that requires continuous development and emphasises the ethical and social competencies of leaders in addition to their professional skills. Kouzes and Posner (2012) see sustainable leadership as a process of continuous adaptation and development. They emphasize the importance of leaders who can adapt to changing circumstances in order to ensure long-term organisational effectiveness. Tideman et al. (2013) see sustainable leadership as an integrative approach that permeates different levels of the organisation. The definition accentuates the active involvement of managers in creating a corporate culture that strives for economic success on the one hand and promotes social responsibility and environmental awareness on the other. Bendell et al. (2017) focus on the integration of personal development and organisational transformation. For them, sustainable leadership means that managers not only focus on their own development, but also have a positive impact on the development of the organisation and its members.

Following these diverse definitions, six central characteristics of sustainable leadership have crystallised, which can be seen in the following table.

Table 1: Characteristics of Sustainable Leadership

Long-term orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and decisions are orientated towards long-term goals • Focus on sustainable success over several periods of time
Holistic thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration of ecological, economic and social dimensions • Integration of aspects such as environmental impact, economic efficiency and social responsibility
Ethics and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear ethical principles guide decisions. • Promoting a corporate culture based on integrity and values
Social responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active participation in social issues and questions of justice • Integration of socially responsible practices models into business
Continuous process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation to changing circumstances • Sustainable development requires continuous further development
Promotion of innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging creative thinking and innovative solutions • Creating an environment that enables continuous improvement and optimisation

(Source: own illustration)

To summarise, sustainable leadership combines long-term orientation, holistic thinking and comprehensive responsibility for the environment, economy and society. It requires continuous learning processes, personal development of managers and the integration of ethical principles into decision-making. In addition, Sustainable Leadership strives for a balanced, value-based and at the same time innovative development of organisations.

III. SUCCESS FACTOR CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE (CQ)

Over 60% of German companies organise their value chain, for example, by sourcing in the Far East, producing in neighbouring countries, exporting goods, outsourcing or increasingly recruiting talent across national borders (Federal Statistical Office 2022). For companies, the question arises as to how collaboration can be as successful as possible in an international

context. Against this backdrop, the importance of cross-cultural management of employees with different value structures, belief systems and traditions is growing.

In this context, CQ is becoming increasingly relevant. CQ can predict the success of leaders in an intercultural environment. Its predictive accuracy has been developed since 2003 and has been proven by numerous studies with tens of thousands of participants (Ang et al. 2015). In addition, CQ improves understanding of the critical skills that enable people to operate successfully in intercultural situations and can be used to identify organisational and personnel deficits, provide targeted training for managers and employees and adapt organisational processes (Ng et al. 2012).

a) *Cultural Intelligence can be Measured and Trained*

In a broader sense, CQ describes an individual's ability to act effectively and efficiently in intercultural situations. According to Earley and Ang (2003), CQ is defined as a form of intelligence that enables individuals to adapt to different cultural contexts, understand cultural differences and interact successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds.

CQ's ability to measure and train intercultural attitudes as much as sensitivities and to predict individual intercultural success is based on a multi-dimensional approach to intelligence. CQ postulates that although talent is partly determined by social and genetic conditions, it can be specifically improved through training and education (Rockstuhl et al. 2011).

The CQ concept is based on the assumptions of Sternberg (2009). According to his model of Triarchic Intelligence, intelligence is three-dimensional (analytical, creative and practical intelligence) and comprises the closely interlinked processes of analysis, experience and adaptation (Sternberg 2009). Accordingly, a person is not only successfully intelligent because they can pass 'good' intelligence tests, but above all because they act with great success in real life. The special thing about real life is that a person is confronted with complex and almost unpredictable environments in which analysing and adapting to the environmental conditions are just as important as the skilful manipulation of settings.

For CQ, the three dimensions of Sternberg's (2009) approach have been adapted and simplified in some ways to suit the purpose of intercultural business success. They do not cover the comprehensive horizon that Sternberg (2009) wanted to examine with his three dimensions, but can be measured more accurately. The four dimensions of CQ are also more suitable when it comes to their application in real business processes. The definition on which these dimensions are based states that CQ is the "ability to function effectively in intercultural contexts" (Ang et al. 2015: 274). As simple as this definition may sound, it contains some profound

features that need to be explained further. The term 'functioning' implies that CQ is focussed on practical purposes. In line with the complex intelligence models proposed by Sternberg (2009), CQ assesses not only potential but also actual success.

Functioning in a new environment indicates the practical ability to adapt well to new cultures. The environment of new cultures is included in the term 'intercultural contexts'. What is particularly important is that the CQ not only explains likely behaviour in completely new cultures, but in any situation where cultural differences are noticeable. Therefore, it also helps to understand why certain people are more successful in communicating and interacting with people of different religion or social class within a national country, organisation or team (van Dyne et al. 2012). The four dimensions include (1) cognitive, (2) metacognitive, (3) motivational and (4) behavioural skills (Bird & Stevens 2018).

Thomas and Inkson (2009) use the same four dimensions, but connote them as follows: (1) cultural knowledge, (2) cultural awareness, (3) cultural motivation and (4) cultural skills. Cultural knowledge refers to the understanding of cultural concepts, traditions and practices. Cultural motivation refers to the willingness to overcome intercultural challenges. Cultural awareness refers to the ability to reflect on one's own and the culture of others. Finally, cultural skills relate to the actual translation of knowledge and motivation into effective action in culturally mixed contexts.

b) *Advantages of CQ in Global Business Environments*

The practical relevance of CQ in global business environments is undisputed. The advantages of CQ are manifold and described below for both internal and external corporate contexts.

1. *Promotion of an Inclusive Organisational Culture*

The development of an inclusive organisational culture is supported by CQ. Livermore (2016) articulates that CQ helps to value diversity and create a positive environment for employees from different cultural backgrounds.

2. *Contribution to Conflict Resolution and a Cooperative Corporate Culture*

The ability of CQ to resolve conflicts and promote a cooperative corporate culture is affirmed by Gudykunst and Kim (2003). They show how CQ can improve communication and resolve conflicts through intercultural sensitivity. Ott and Michailova (2018) also emphasise that a high level of cultural intelligence helps to minimise misunderstandings and strengthen interpersonal relationships.

3. *Promotion of Ethics and Social Responsibility*

The promotion of ethics and social responsibility through CQ is highlighted by Bird and Stevens (2018). They show how CQ can contribute to



ethical leadership by helping leaders understand the social impact of their decisions.

4. *Strengthening Employee Satisfaction*

The strengthening of employee satisfaction through CQ is key to success according to Livermore (2016). CQ enables managers to create a positive working environment that respects the needs and values of all employees.

5. *Effective Development of International Business Relationships*

Research by Ang et al. (2007) shows that managers with high cultural intelligence are more effective at leading global teams and building international business relationships. The effectiveness of CQ in building international relationships is also emphasised by Rockstuhl et al. (2011). They stress the role of CQ in overcoming cultural differences and promoting successful cross-border collaboration.

6. *Risk Reduction in International Business Transactions*

The role of CQ in reducing risk in international business deals is also articulated by Livermore (2016). CQ empowers executives to understand cultural nuances and better assess potential risks.

7. *Improvement of Customer Relationships*

The improvement of customer relationships through CQ is emphasised by Thomas and Inkson (2009). They show how CQ equips managers with the ability to respond to cultural preferences and thus increase customer trust and satisfaction.

8. *Successful M&A Integration*

Ang et al. (2007) link the successful integration of a company in the context of mergers with CQ. CQ plays a crucial role in bridging cultural differences between merging companies and thus ensuring a smooth merger process.

IV. THE LINK BETWEEN CQ AND SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP

The integration of CQ in the context of sustainable leadership offers a valuable opportunity to make global and at the same time sustainable corporate management more successful. This chapter discusses the link between CQ and sustainable leadership, highlighting both the direct support provided by CQ and the synergies between CQ and sustainable leadership.

As outlined above, CQ promotes an inclusive organisational culture, which is an essential foundation for sustainable leadership. Research by Livermore (2016) emphasises that leaders with a high level of CQ are more capable of leading diverse teams and creating an inclusive environment. This helps to ensure the inclusion of different perspectives and, by extension, CQ as a key support factor for sustainable leadership in global organisations. CQ permits (enables) leaders to

manage cultural diversity more effectively and operate more successfully in international contexts. Cultural knowledge plays a decisive role in this. Managers with a sound understanding of different cultures are able to make better decisions that take social and socio-cultural aspects into account in addition to the economic perspective. This strengthens acceptance and trust among suppliers, customers and business partners in distant countries (Bird & Stevens 2018).

The synergies between CQ and sustainable leadership are manifold and range from promoting corporate social responsibility to global collaboration. Managers and leaders who have both strong CQ and sustainable leadership principles are better placed to lead intercultural teams and to build and maintain international business relationships (Paiuc 2021).

The Essential Synergies are Discussed below:

1. *Cultural Diversity, Inclusion and Social Responsibility*

One of the key synergies between CQ and Sustainable Leadership is the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusion. CQ enables leaders to create an organisational culture that respects diversity and fosters an inclusive environment, which in turn contributes to more socially and ethically oriented behaviours and business practices (Livermore 2016). Ang et al. (2007) also point out that an inclusive organisational culture increases employee satisfaction.

Another advantage of this integrated approach lies in the promotion of ethics and social responsibility. Managers with a high level of CQ not only consider economic goals, but also have a deeper understanding of cultural values and the social impact of business decisions on the company and the relevant stakeholders (Brislin et al. 2006).

2. *Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution*

CQ promotes effective intercultural communication and contributes to conflict resolution. This is particularly relevant for sustainable leadership, as open and respectful communication is a basic prerequisite for developing sustainable and ethically responsible ways of working (Awan et al. 2018).

3. *Promotion of Ethical Decision-Making, Employee Motivation and Loyalty*

The CQ supports the development of ethical decision-making processes by helping managers to understand cultural values and norms. This ability to orientate ethically is a key feature of sustainable leadership (Awan et al. 2018). Managers who possess CQ are thus better able to take individual needs and cultural differences into account, which leads to increased employee satisfaction (Rockstuhl et al., 2011). This in turn not only contributes to a positive corporate culture, but also promotes loyalty between employees. Sustainable leadership based on the principles of CQ thus creates an environment in which employees enjoy

working, are more productive and make a lasting contribution to the company's success.

4. *Promoting Innovation through Cultural Diversity*

The consideration of cultural diversity, supported by the CQ, contributes to an innovative corporate culture. Sustainable leadership benefits from this by promoting sustainable and environmentally friendly innovations (Rockstuhl et al. 2011). CQ contributes significantly to increasing the innovative capacity and adaptability of organisations. Research findings by Wang and Goh (2020) emphasise that leaders with a high CQ are better able to generate innovative ideas from different cultural perspectives. This not only promotes creativity within the team, but also enables faster adaptation to changing global markets. The ability to synchronise with different cultural influences thus becomes a competitive advantage, which has a positive impact on the sustainable success of the organisation.

5. *Long-Term Relationships and Social Responsibility*

The application of CQ in all areas of a company not only facilitates internal operations, but also makes a significant contribution to improving market development and international cooperation. Managers and employees with a high level of CQ can respond better to the cultural preferences, expectations and local business practices of new business partners. This leads to more effective market development in new regions and consequently strengthens customer relationships and loyalty, as customers feel better understood (Thomas & Inkson, 2009). This aspect in particular emphasises the basic idea of sustainable leadership with regard to economically sustainable business management.

6. *Adaptability to Different Business Environments*

CQ enables increased adaptability to different cultural business environments, for example when entering the market in China or India. Sensitivity and flexibility are of great importance here, particularly with regard to adapting business practices to different social contexts and legal requirements (Livermore, 2016). A high degree of consideration is required when initiating business in distant markets with significant cultural differences.

7. *International Cooperation, Risk Reduction and Crisis Management*

The ability to operate effectively in a global context is crucial for both CQ and sustainable leadership. CQ enables managers to build and maintain more successful business relationships, which in turn supports economic success (Rockstuhl et al., 2011). Managers who are able to understand cultural contexts can also identify potential conflicts and risks at an early stage and respond proactively. This helps to protect the company from potential damage and strengthen its

resilience to external challenges (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Solomon & Steyn, 2017).

8. *Promotion of Social Responsibility in Supplier Relationships and Production Processes*

Observing cultural and sustainable responsibility in supplier relationships is another important aspect. Managers and executives will increasingly ensure that suppliers are treated fairly and that ethical standards are adhered to. This directly complies with the German Supply Chain Duty of Care Act (LkSG), promotes responsible supplier management and thus strengthens the positive image of the company (Gudykunst & Kim 2003; Rausch-Phan & Siegfried 2022). The same applies to the organisation of transnational production and work processes. Ethically responsible production practices and working methods that respect social and cultural standards are proactively taken into account (Brislin et al. 2006). In addition, recognition and respect for global environmental standards are promoted. CQ enables managers to understand cultural differences in environmental approaches and to develop more sustainable practices, e.g. with suppliers or producers, that take the local context into account (Thomas & Inkson, 2009).

9. *Successful Merger & Acquisition Integration and International Consolidation*

CQ also plays a crucial role in the context of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and international mergers. Managers with CQ can better manage the cultural differences between the organisations involved, enabling smooth integration and a successful transition. This leads to effective utilisation of synergies and long-term M&A success (Osland 2018).

10. *Strengthening Global Reputation and Brand Management*

A final point is the strengthening of global reputation and brand management. Bhagat (2017) shows in a research article that organisations whose managers have a strong CQ are better able to adapt their messages to different cultural contexts. This not only promotes brand acceptance in different regions, but also contributes to the company being perceived as globally orientated. A positive global reputation is not only crucial for branding, but also for the long-term development of companies (Gupta et al. 2008).

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPANIES

The previous elaborations illustrate the great importance of cultural intelligence for successful sustainable leadership in an international context.

The integration of CQ into sustainable leadership must be understood as a process and requires a systematic approach. By formulating guidelines and principles, companies can create suitable framework conditions to gradually dovetail the two concepts of CQ and sustainable leadership and

specifically promote a leadership culture with high cultural intelligence (Solomon & Steyn 2017; Wang & Goh 2020).

Creating such a culture requires a comprehensive transformation of organisational values and practices. Companies must promote an inclusive organisational culture that views diversity and cultural sensitivity as fundamental elements of leadership. This can be achieved through targeted measures such as mentoring programmes or diversity initiatives (Dover et al. 2020; Puritty et al. 2017).

Furthermore, employees, executives and managers alike must be sensitised to the high benefits of CQ and trained accordingly. With this in mind, CQ-based training programmes can be introduced to prepare staff for cultural challenges and strengthen their skills in intercultural communication and collaboration. Regular training programmes can ensure that CQ skills are deepened and continuously improved (Bhagat 2017; Rockstuhl et al., 2011).

It is important to consider the specific requirements of the company and the industry in order to design suitable training programmes and training measures. The programmes can include interactive workshops, case studies, simulation-based training and intercultural awareness units. Particular attention should be paid to the practical applicability of the acquired knowledge in day-to-day management practice (Awan et al. 2018; Lenartowicz et al., 2014). Furthermore, the diverseness of learning styles, experiences and cultural diversity requires the possibility of flexible and individualised training opportunities. This can be achieved, for example, through the provision of self-learning modules, personalised coaching or peer-to-peer learning approaches (Ferreira-Lopes & Rompay-Bartels 2019).

The success of the CQ training programmes and the transformation of the leadership culture should be evaluated on the basis of measurable objectives. Companies can measure progress using various performance indicators such as intercultural team performance, successful international business deals or employee satisfaction. By integrating control mechanisms, companies can ensure that the activities and measures are having the desired effect. This also enables companies to adapt flexibly to the dynamic business environment and thus secure their long-term competitiveness (Thomas & Inkson 2009; Wang & Goh 2020).

VI. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Sustainable management goes far beyond ecological perspectives. Rather, it encompasses the responsible and targeted interaction between companies and their relevant stakeholders in the context of constantly changing economic activity.

The detailed assessment of the synergies and benefits of CQ within the framework of sustainable leadership underpins the relevance of this key competence for companies. It asserts that CQ is not merely a helpful addition, but an indispensable support for sustainable leadership.

The promotion of an inclusive organisational culture, greater ethical and social responsibility in decision-making and the development of effective international business relationships illustrate the positive effects of CQ at various levels of management. The additional benefits, such as the improvement of customer relationships, the opportunity to reduce risk and the successful organisation of the corporate value chain, demonstrate the far-reaching positive effects.

CQ can be learned. This key realisation offers companies the opportunity to systematically and sustainably embed CQ in the corporate culture, the management concept and the operational activities themselves. The creation of an integrative and sustainable culture as well as the training and development of managers, executives and employees are decisive steps on the way to inter-culturally sensitive and long-term successful corporate management. Companies that heed these recommendations will not only reap the economic benefits, but will also fulfil their social responsibility and make a valuable contribution to a more sustainable global business environment.

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