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EXPLORING INTERLINKAGE BETWEEN SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACES: A CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Explorando a interligação entre liderança espiritual e local de trabalho sustentável: Uma discussão conceitual

Explorando la interrelación entre liderazgo espiritual y ambiente de trabajo sostenible: Una discusión conceptual

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ABSTRACT

Although organizations are aware of the 17 goals proposed by the 2030 UN Agenda, there is little understanding of how to achieve sustainability. In this context, it is believed that spiritual leadership (SL) may be capable of directing initiatives to address sustainability challenges in organizations, by promoting a sustainable workplace. Thus, this theoretical essay aims to understand the connection between SL and the development of a sustainable workplace. We bring three contributions: it demonstrates how SL can be considered a driving force for organizational sustainability; we explain how SL impacts not only at an individual level but also on teams and the organization as a whole, through spiritual well-being, leading to commitment and productivity; we propose a conceptual scheme showing how the previous findings form a sustainable workplace promoted by SL. Given the scarcity of such theoretical insights in the existing literature, our contributions represent an opportunity to advance knowledge on this research topic, paving the way for future empirical investigations.

Keywords: spiritual leadership, sustainability, sustainable workplace, spiritual well-being, commitment.

RESUMO

Apesar de conhecerem os 17 objetivos do desenvolvimento sustentável propostos pela Agenda 2030 das Nações Unidas, há pouca compreensão sobre como alcançar a sustentabilidade. Nesse contexto, acredita-se que o estilo de liderança espiritual (LE) pode ser capaz de direcionar as iniciativas para enfrentar os desafios da sustentabilidade nas organizações, por meio da promoção de um ambiente de trabalho sustentável. Assim, este ensaio teórico tem como objetivo compreender a conexão entre a LE e o desenvolvimento de um ambiente de trabalho sustentável. Trazemos três contribuições: demonstramos como o estilo de LE pode ser considerado uma mola promotora da sustentabilidade organizacional; explicamos como a LE impacta não apenas em nível individual, mas também nas equipes e na organização como um todo, por meio do bem-estar espiritual, levando ao comprometimento e produtividade; propomos um esquema conceitual mostrando como as constatações anteriores conformam um ambiente de trabalho sustentável promovido pela LE. Dada a escassez de considerações teóricas na literatura acadêmica existente, as contribuições aqui apresentadas representam oportunidades para avançar no conhecimento a respeito desse tema de pesquisa, oferecendo elementos para futuras pesquisas empíricas.

Palavras-chaves: *liderança espiritual, sustentabilidade, ambiente de trabalho sustentável, bem-estar espiritual, comprometimento.*

RESUMEN

A pesar de que las organizaciones tienen conocimiento de los 17 objetivos propuestos por la Agenda 2030 de la ONU, existe poca comprensión sobre cómo lograr la sostenibilidad. En este contexto, se cree que liderazgo espiritual (LE) puede ser capaz de orientar las iniciativas para abordar los desafíos de sostenibilidad en las organizaciones, mediante la promoción de un entorno de trabajo sostenible. Así, este ensayo teórico tiene como objetivo comprender la conexión entre LE y el desarrollo de un lugar de trabajo sostenible. Aportamos tres contribuciones: demostramos como el LE puede considerarse un catalizador de la sostenibilidad organizacional; explicamos como el LE impacta no solo a nivel individual, sino también en los equipos y en la organización en su conjunto, a través del bienestar espiritual, conduciendo al compromiso y la productividad; proponemos un esquema conceptual que muestra como las contribuciones anteriores conforman un ambiente de trabajo sostenible promovido por el LE. Dada la escasez de tales conocimientos teóricos en la literatura existente, nuestras contribuciones representan una oportunidad para el avance de la investigación sobre el tema, allanando el camino para futuras investigaciones empíricas.

Palabras clave: *liderazgo espiritual, sostenibilidad, entorno de trabajo sostenible, bienestar espiritual, compromiso.*

INTRODUCTION

The UN's 2030 Agenda guides the pursuit of organizational sustainability (Galleli et al., 2021) in social, economic, and environmental terms, fostering an ethical workplace (Fry, 2003). Research is being conducted to understand how organizations can establish goals and indicators aligned with the 2030 Agenda (Galleli et al., 2020). The connection of organizations with sustainability must manifest transversally, promoting the identification, adaptation, and implementation of initiatives that integrate sustainability into the organizational strategy (Egel & Fry, 2017a; Galleli et al., 2020; Rubio-Mozos et al., 2020; Voegtlin et al., 2020), through a greater purpose that permeates leadership, teams, and the organization. This implies setting goals and indicators aimed at profitability and commitment to the environment and society (Fry & Egel, 2021; Samul, 2020a, 2020b; Voegtlin, et al., 2020).

In this context, the non profit organization Inner Development Goals (IDG) play a crucial role by offering it's a set of guidelines called "Goal 0." The IDG anticipates the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), connecting and empowering leaders to tackle socio-environmental challenges. This approach guides leaders in the perception and development of strategic and transversal skills and behaviors that are fundamental to promoting the 2030 Agenda (Galleli et al., 2021). However, few studies have been conducted to understand which skills and behaviors are necessary for leaders to face and enhance the outcomes of their actions in advancing the Agenda (Galleli et al., 2020; Inner Development Goals, 2021).

Moreover, the implementation of initiatives for organizational sustainability requires a leadership style capable of identifying and promoting ethical communication (Fry & Egel, 2017) clearly and effectively among people, society, and organizations (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023; Yang & Fry, 2018). It must also consider the multidimensionality and complexity of challenges related to organizational sustainability at different levels - individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole (Fry & Cohen, 2008; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023), based on the connection between the leader's vision and values, integrated with the vision and values of individuals, teams, and the organization (Inner Development Goals, 2021; Samul, 2020a, 2020b). Therefore, the leader plays a fundamental role in the process of relating ethics, vision, and values, and is responsible for connecting and guiding actions aligned with the organizational strategy (Arnaud & Wasieleski, 2014; Strand, 2014) directed toward sustainability.

However, it should be noted that achieving sustainability requires the leader to adopt an integral approach, encompassing not only economic, social, and environmental aspects but also the connection with fundamental aspects centered on the human being (Fry & Kriger, 2009), which include body, mind, heart, and spirit (Fry, 2003) – adopting a holistic vision mutually shared among people and organizational values (Fabio, 2017; Hunsaker, 2016; Jiménez et al., 2017; Wilber, 2000).

Given these demands, different approaches to leadership styles based on ethical values have gained prominence in academic studies for achieving organizational sustainability. However, this

theoretical essay seeks to demonstrate that spiritual leadership (SL) appears to be the leadership style capable of addressing this holistic vision of people connected with the organization (Fry, 2003; Fry & Kriger, 2009; Wilber, 2000), integrating individual, team, and organizational values and promoting actions aligned with sustainability (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Fry & Slocum, 2008; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023; Samul, 2020a).

SL has gained prominence by promoting the ethical integration of mission, vision, and values aimed at organizational sustainability (Fry & Egel, 2021). This is achieved through initiatives that link the individual values of the leader to the organizational vision, inspiring their teams to act for spiritual well-being. This well-being is understood as an element that nourishes and empowers the individual to feel connected and motivated to achieve goals aligned with spiritual values, consisting of values, attitudes, and behaviors intrinsically motivating for oneself and others, promoting a sense of spiritual survival through belonging and purpose (Fry, 2003). This focus can improve team and organizational productivity and commitment (Bandura, 2008; Samul, 2020a).

Thus, the connection between ethics and organizational sustainability occurs through initiatives led by the spiritual leader and their teams (Fry & Egel, 2021). These, aligned with socio-environmental challenges (Galleli et al., 2021), foster a sustainable workplace characterized by the systematic pursuit of operational and economic results based on well-being, ethical commitment, and sustainability, considering care for people, the organization, and the environment (Samul, 2020a).

This relationship between SL and organizational sustainability has been highlighted in various studies (Afsar et al., 2016; Caldana & Macini, 2021; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Fry & Slocum, 2008; Samul, 2020a; Wahid & Mustamil, 2017), although still in a stage of theoretical conceptualization (Samul, 2020a, 2021). However, these studies do not clearly and explicitly establish the connection and integration of SL in the context of organizational sustainability or explain how these relationships occur. Moreover, the relationship between organizational sustainability and the practice of spiritual values still lacks a deeper understanding of how organizational sustainability's theoretical and practical issues (Caldana & Macini, 2021) can be addressed and implemented by leaders with spiritual foundations (Barron & Chou, 2017).

Thus, new studies are needed to direct and enhance initiatives aligned with organizational sustainability, explaining how the relationships between SL, sustainability, and a sustainable workplace manifest in organizations and how they can be replicated in different contexts (Oh & Wang, 2020; Samul, 2020a). To advance this topic, this theoretical essay seeks to understand the connection between SL and the development of a sustainable workplace through the convergence between SL and sustainability.

This article presents three theoretical contributions to the development of the topic: a) demonstrates how SL can be considered a driving force for organizational sustainability, as it promotes connection with the life purpose of its followers and society; b) explains how the spiritual leader is the link of impact not only at an individual level but also in teams and the organization as a whole, reflecting on spiritual well-being, commitment, and

productivity; c) proposes a conceptual scheme showing how the previous contributions form a sustainable workplace promoted by SL. This proposition, not identified in the academic literature researched, aims to contribute to future research seeking the development of conceptual and theoretical models for empirical application. In addition, it presents some empirical contributions of SL actions that contribute to some SDGs and suggests possible paths for future research, both theoretically and practically, related to the values and initiatives of spiritual leaders in the workplace (Oh & Wang, 2020; Reave, 2005; Samul, 2020a) aiming to make it sustainable.

The first section after this introduction presents the reasons for adopting SL; the second addresses the connection between SL and organizational sustainability; the third explores how SL, organizational sustainability, and organizational culture are related; the fourth discusses the role of SL in promoting a sustainable workplace; the fifth presents a scheme that seeks to aid in understanding the connections of SL in organizations seeking sustainability. Finally, the concluding remarks, contributions, and suggestions for future research are presented.

WHY SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP?

Since the 1970s, researchers have begun to direct their attention toward the perspective of followers rather than focusing solely on the interests of organizations (Samul, 2020a; Yukl, 2013). Since then, leadership has been understood as a process of shared influence by a social system involving the interdependence between individuals, teams, and organizations, which can vary according to the situation (Day & Harrison, 2007) and is considered an influence that affects people's lives (Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023; Samul, 2020a). In the early 2000s, unethical practices in the organizational environment began to emerge and persist. This led to the search for leadership styles capable of dealing with issues such as lack of trust, absence of morality, and inappropriate behaviors in the workplace (Fry & Egel, 2021; Yukl, 2013). Leadership based on ethical values gained prominence as a response to these issues (Oh & Wang, 2020; Samul, 2020a), and academic research began to explore how leaders exert influence based on ethical values (Jensen et al., 2019; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023), resulting in various leadership styles (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary Framework of Leadership Styles

Leadership Styles	Concept	Fundamentals	Authors
Transformational Leadership	A leadership style that seeks to inspire and motivate followers to surpass their own limitations and commit to ambitious goals and objectives through the establishment of a trusting relationship with the followers, generating not only individual performance change but also a transformation in the overall organizational culture.	- Creation of an inspiring vision - Transmission of ethical values and high ideals - Development of individuals.	(Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1994; Yukl, 2013).
Servant Leadership	A leadership style that focuses on putting the needs of others first. A servant leader prioritizes the well-being and development of their followers rather than seeking only personal success, promoting an environment of trust, respect, and collaboration.	- Values such as empathy, humility, ethics, and commitment to the common good.	(Udani & Lorenzo-Molo, 2013; Yukl, 2013).
Ethical Leadership	A leadership style in which leaders rely on strong ethical principles and moral values to guide their actions and decisions, serving as a role model for team members and contributing to the construction of an ethical and healthy organizational culture.	- Transparency in communications - Respect for diversity Promotion of equal opportunities - Decisions based on ethical criteria and values	(Fry & Kriger, 2009; Wang et al., 2017; Yukl, 2013).
Authentic Leadership	A leadership style based on authenticity and congruence between the leader's values, beliefs, behaviors, and actions. This allows the leader to create a positive and encouraging workplace, where people feel valued and encouraged to be authentic in their contributions.	- Authenticity and transparency of the leader in their actions and communication - Congruence between the leader's ethical values, beliefs, and behaviors.	(Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Chang et al., 2020; Fry & Kriger, 2009; Yukl, 2013).

Spiritual Leadership	A leadership style that is based on the connection between spiritual values and principles and the practice of leadership. This leader is guided by a higher purpose that goes beyond financial and material results, creating a workplace based on ethical values, mutual respect, balance, and harmony, transcending personal interests, and seeking the spiritual well-being and development of followers and the organization.	- Congruent ethical and moral values
		  Inspiring purpose
		  Inner life
		- Personal and spiritual growth
		- Holistic approach that considers the spiritual dimension of individuals and recognizes its importance in the organizational context.
			(Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Fry, 2003; Fry & Kriger, 2009; Yukl, 2013).

Analyzing the foundations of the leadership styles (Table 1), in addition to the ethical value that guided the choice of these styles, other common points are observed, such as the creation of an inspiring vision/purpose (transformational and spiritual leadership), congruence between ethical and moral values (authentic and spiritual leadership), and transparency in communication (ethical and authentic leadership). It is important to highlight that in all the styles presented, leadership is seen as a process in which the leader and their followers mutually influence each other (Saane, 2019; Samul, 2020b), a fact extremely relevant to the construction of this essay.

Examining these foundations more closely (Table 1), it is noted that only SL adopts a holistic approach to people, considering the human being as an integrated whole: body (physical), mind (logical/rational thinking), heart (emotions, feelings), and spirit (Fry, 2003; Fry & Kriger, 2009; Wilber, 2000). Therefore, when a leader acts holistically, they seek to integrate the spiritual well-being of followers, promote positive social impact, assume environmental responsibility, and create harmony with the community where the organization is inserted, going far beyond mere financial indicators (Egel & Fry, 2017b; Fry & Egel, 2021; Samul, 2020b; Yang & Fry, 2018), for sustainable decision-making, and strategically operationalizing trade-off moments (Corral-Marfil et al., 2021). By adopting this approach, leaders promote a long-term vision, sustainability, and balance among various aspects of the organizational context, establishing a natural connection with sustainability (Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Fry, 2003; Inner Development Goals, 2021; Samul, 2020b).

We believe that SL can integrate individual and team values with organizational values, promoting actions aligned with operational results convergent with organizational sustainability (Fairholm, 1996; Fry & Egel, 2021; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Fry & Slocum, 2008). SL can promote social, environmental, and economic aspects among people, acting with an integral vision (Wilber, 2000), including the spiritual well-being of people as the central point of its ethics. Thus, the moral action of SL (Reave, 2005; Suriyankietkaew & Kantamara, 2019) defines the limits of the initiatives necessary to achieve a sustainable organizational strategy (Prihandono & Wijayanto, 2021), always taking into consideration the spiritual well-being of individuals (Samul, 2020a; Zawawi & Wahab, 2019).

Given the above, it is important to highlight a relevant position adopted in this theoretical essay. SL is analyzed from the perspective of Bandura's (2008) social cognitive theory (SCT), which provides the psychological context to understand how spiritual leaders can influence their followers through shared beliefs, values, and behaviors, connecting and motivating them in the pursuit of a sustainable organization. When combined with the model proposed by Fry (2003), it acts as a motivational mechanism for accomplishing the organizational strategy (Anser et al., 2021; Bandura, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Despite placing greater emphasis on intrinsic motivation in the workplace (Fry, 2003), SCT helps to understand how people observe, learn, and imitate the behaviors and actions of their models, suggesting that leaders can model their followers' behaviors. This is the link between Bandura's (1977, 2008) motivation and Fry's (2003) broader approach to motivation theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fry, 2003; Fry & Kriger, 2009; Fry et al., 2010).

Thus, this study understands that SL incorporates elements of SCT to promote a holistic and sustainable approach to leadership, seeking significant and positive outcomes for all involved, acting as the link of motivation that connects leaders, teams, and organizational strategy. Table 2 clearly shows the relationship between these concepts.

Table 2. Relationship between SCT and SL

Main Connections	Analyses of Social Cognitive Theory Vs. Spiritual Leadership	Authors
Self-efficacy and trust	Both highlight the importance of self-efficacy and self-confidence in facing challenges. A spiritual leader seeks to develop self-efficacy in their followers, encouraging them to believe in their abilities and potential, which enhances their motivation to tackle tasks and goals.	(Fry & Egel, 2021; Oh & Wang, 2020; Samul, 2020a; Yang et al., 2019).
Behavior modeling	Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) emphasizes learning through observation and behavior modeling of others. A spiritual leader, by demonstrating ethical values and behaviors aligned with sustainability, acts as a role model for their followers, inspiring them to act similarly and achieve positive outcomes.	
Values and purpose	Spiritual leadership involves the integration of individual and organizational values. SCT acknowledges the importance of values in shaping people's beliefs and motivations. A spiritual leader seeks to align individuals' and teams' values with organizational values, creating a shared purpose that drives engagement and commitment.	
Self-determination and self-regulation	SCT emphasizes the importance of self-determination and self-regulation of behavior. A spiritual leader encourages their followers to take responsibility for their actions and make ethical decisions aligned with sustainability.	(Fry & Kriger, 2009; Samul, 2020b).
Positive social impact	Both recognize the importance of positive social impact. A spiritual leader seeks to create a sustainable workplace and promote initiatives that benefit the community and society, which increases followers' motivation and sense of purpose.	(Fry & Egel, 2021; Samul, 2020a).

Sources: based on Bandura (2008) and Fry and Cohen (2008).

Therefore, the purpose of SL can be perceived from three pillars: creating congruence between individual, team, and organizational values and visions; highlighting spiritual well-being through the purpose and belonging of leaders and followers; and, finally, nurturing high levels of spiritual well-being in individuals, connection with sustainability, and operational results (Fry & Kriger, 2009; Samul, 2020b). In this sense, SL contributes to organizations directing their attention beyond economic contributions, promoting connection with the life purpose of their followers and with society (Samul, 2020a).

POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

In the context of organizations, sustainability is intrinsically linked to the regulation of fundamental principles and responsibility toward the needs of society and the market (Cavagnaro & Curiel, 2022). When incorporated into organizational strategy, it can become an essential part of the business practices of organizations (Bonn & Fisher, 2011; Galleli et al., 2020). In this sense, it is crucial to establish mechanisms that drive the natural manifestation of sustainability in organizations, simultaneously promoting the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda goals. This approach aims to foster commitment and productivity, establishing a continuous flow of initiatives to achieve such goals (Fry & Egel, 2021; Samul, 2020a). Thus, the organization needs to be financially viable, socially just, and environmentally responsible by implementing actions that connect People, Planet, and Profit - known as the triple bottom line (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999).

In this scenario, the leader plays a fundamental role in the search for sustainable organizational performance, promoting the connection between economic, social, and environmental aspects to meet the needs and expectations of customers and other stakeholders in the long term. This demands effective management, awareness among the organization's personnel, learning, and the application of appropriate improvements and innovations (Ahmad et al., 2018; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023; Iqbal, 2023).

Thus, the leader's contribution goes beyond the simple application of their competencies and is associated with the adopted leadership style, which directly and indirectly impacts sustainable organizational performance (Galleli et al., 2020; Galleli et al., 2021; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023). Various authors highlight that leadership styles, such as transformational, servant, and ethical, contribute to sustainable development (Burawat, 2019; Du et al., 2013; Fatoki, 2019; Jiang & Messersmith, 2017; Siddiquei et al., 2021; Widisatria & Nawangsari, 2021; Ying et al., 2020). However, these styles do not seem to simultaneously influence performance in the three aspects (Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023).

This highlights the importance of a leadership approach that encompasses not only economic, social, and environmental sustainability but also the connection with the fundamental aspects of being human, including body, mind, heart, and spirit (Fry, 2003), such as SL. When adopting this approach, the leader plays a crucial role in promoting the organization's sustainable performance, transcending the traditional dimensions of sustainability, and encompassing a more holistic perspective of human and organizational relations (Fabio, 2017; Jiménez et al., 2017; Wilber, 2000), becoming a fundamental figure for the integration of sustainability in all aspects of the organization (Strand, 2014).

In this context, the leader's participation and adoption of IDG's efforts and guidelines (Goal 0), become a concrete path for their development. The IDG aims to promote the internal development of leaders, empowering them to deal with complex social issues, especially those identified in the UN's 2030 Agenda, preparing individuals to address the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Furthermore, SL can act as a link for organizations wishing to voluntarily adhere to the Global Compact, a non-profit organization that seeks to encourage organizations to align their strategies and operations with universal principles in human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption. This is achieved through guidelines that promote sustainable growth and citizenship, contributing to addressing society's challenges through committed and innovative corporate leadership. Organizations that join the Global Compact also contribute to the achievement of the 17 SDG (Global Compact, 2023).

Therefore, we understand that the personal spiritual qualities of SL provide the foundation upon which leaders can contribute by promoting a sustainability mindset, seeking higher levels of consciousness, both in terms of self-awareness and other-centeredness, creating a workplace to maximize the triple bottom line (Fry & Egel, 2017).

THE SPIRITUAL LEADER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SUSTAINABILITY-ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

As we have previously seen, a leader with a Spiritual Leadership (SL) style can be considered the link to achieving sustainability in organizations. At the organizational level, it is necessary to consider the influence of organizational culture, which plays an important role in guiding how the mission, vision, and organizational values should manifest (Gupta et al., 2014). When this culture is established based on spiritual values, it can sustainably contribute to building one of the most important and competitive-driving intangible assets in organizations: people (Streimikiene et al., 2021; Tate & Bals, 2018). Thus, the manifestation of organizational culture must occur continuously and comprehensively, with the leader being the figure responsible for establishing the ethical base through their vision and values, aligning them in an interconnected way with the teams and the organization (Arnaud & Wasieleski, 2014; Strand, 2014).

Given this reality, the leader is responsible for operationalizing and disseminating an organizational culture based on shared values, practices, and governance processes (Lima & Galleli, 2021). To achieve this, alignment between the vision and values of leadership, teams, and the organization is necessary to promote changes and implement actions required to achieve sustainability (Fairholm, 1996). This is only possible with the promotion of a conscious organizational culture of sharing, in which each person contributes and benefits with equal dignity within a context of authentic reciprocity (Fry & Egel, 2021; Mackey & Sisodia, 2014). This conscious organizational culture is established through values based on trust, authenticity, care, transparency, integrity, learning, and empowerment (Fry & Egel, 2021).

The spiritual leader stands out in this context for their ability to integrate their own values with spiritual values based on ethics and to connect their own vision with the organizational vision, influencing organizational practices (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). The ethical base can be understood here as the principle that defines moral boundaries, seeking a balance between

the care for people, the organization, and the environment, especially in organizations seeking a greater purpose (Fry & Egel, 2021; Legault, 2012; Mackey & Sisodia, 2014).

The leader's connection with themselves, the organization, and the workplace creates a sense of presence that motivates the individual to pursue the fulfillment of their purpose and sense of belonging in the relationships between leader and led and in the context of the organization (Fry, 2003; Mackey & Sisodia, 2014; Samul, 2020a; Yang & Fry, 2018), all promoted by a conscious organizational culture (Fry & Egel, 2021). It is believed that SL promotes the learning of the led through observation and modeling of behavior (Bandura, 2008), leading teams to achieve the organization's expected results related to sustainability by connecting the organizational vision with their own vision and putting into practice values based on altruism and faith/hope (Fry, 2003; Fry & Egel, 2021; Heidegger, 1996).

The conduct carried out by SL can be observed through its initiatives, in the way the leader expresses their values and establishes the link between organizational guidelines and practical relations that connect the strategy to their teams. Thus, SL plays an important role in creating interconnectivity between the organizational unit and all environments surrounding the company. Therefore, the role of SL, expressed through its initiatives, is fundamental in promoting the necessary transformations to achieve organizational sustainability (Barron & Chou, 2017; Fry & Wigglesworth, 2013).

Thus, we present the first assumption of this theoretical essay: *the inner life of the leader is established by how they relate to values considered spiritual, making it possible to understand the relationship between the organization and SL from the identification of the leader's initiatives and their relations with other individuals.*

Some recent studies point to mechanisms by which SL can promote an organizational culture oriented toward sustainability. One of these mechanisms can occur by stimulating employee creativity (Jeon & Choi, 2020), promoting an environment conducive to innovation and allowing the development of new sustainable practices (Zhang & Yang, 2021). Moreover, SL can promote a culture oriented toward organizational citizenship behavior, understood as positive contributions of employees to the success and culture of a company beyond their formal tasks and responsibilities (Samul, 2020a, 2020b). This occurs through encouraging practices such as energy conservation, waste reduction, and recycling, and inspiring coworkers and organizations to participate in such discretionary environmental behaviors (Anser et al., 2021).

Fry and Egel (2017) highlight that the change in behavior of CEOs, by promoting a sustainable workplace through spirituality, leads organizations to greater productivity, flexibility, and creativity, becoming sources of sustainable competitive advantage. These initiatives, linked to the behavior of SL, foster a sense of purpose and belonging, both in the leader and their collaborators, contributing to establishing a culture oriented toward organizational sustainability (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020; Samul, 2020b).

Therefore, the second assumption of this theoretical essay is established: *To achieve sustainability in organizations it is necessary to reconcile the practice of individual values of the Spiritual Leader with those of the teams and the organization through initiatives that promote a sense of belonging and purpose.*

Up to this point, we have explored possible links between SL and Sustainability and SL and organizational culture. To advance and achieve our goal, we need to identify mechanisms that lead to the promotion of a sustainable workplace, even in the face of internal and external challenges to organizations that present themselves to leaders.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACE: THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

The UN 2030 Agenda was created to secure a global commitment to the fight against ecosystem degradation and socioeconomic inequalities (Fry & Egel, 2021; Ives et al., 2023). However, governments worldwide have failed to incorporate the SDGs into their policies and public investments (Sustainable Development Report, 2023), and geopolitical conflicts further impair global cooperation. This may lead to the neglect of people's attitudes and beliefs, crucial for change in the current system (Ives et al., 2023). Internally, organizations face challenges in creating sustainable workplaces, including a lack of support and interest and a -sole focus on profit by leadership at all levels (Farooq et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021). The leaders have expeirenced all these conditions, which lead to unsustainable workplaces.

One way in which the leader can minimize the impacts of these challenges and not halt the construction of a sustainable workplace is in the understanding that change must begin internally, with transformations in values to promote a society and organizations aimed at the well-being of people and the preservation of the environment (Ives et al., 2023). In this context, SL plays a fundamental role in promoting the ideal conditions for sustainability (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Iqbal et al., 2021). Initiatives such as the practice of effective communication can be a fundamental tool in this context to connect organizational strategy, leadership practice, and team actions in an ethical environment, prioritizing the spiritual well-being of people, creating a workplace that allows the relationship between leader and led (Samul, 2020a), driven by a conscious organizational culture.

Therefore, the starting point is the promotion of people's spiritual well-being to build a sustainable workplace. The concept of spiritual well-being in this study is based on the definition of ethical well-being (Cashman, 1998; Fry, 2003), in which values, attitudes, and behaviors considered universal can be experienced freely and authentically by everyone, respecting each one's subjectivity (Fry & Whittington, 2005).

Moreover, spiritual well-being is related to SCT to the extent that spiritual beliefs, values, and motivations can influence a person's behavior and self-efficacy, thus affecting their ability to face challenges and seek a life with a greater sense of purpose, fulfillment, autonomy, and self-responsibility (Bandura, 2008).

The relationship between spiritual well-being and SL is linked to the organization's purpose, which leads leaders and led to experience spiritual well-being through dimensions of physical and psychological health, established by the sense of purpose and belonging in connection

with the vision and values at the individual, team, and organizational levels (Fry & Cohen, 2008; Fry et al., 2007).

However, to construct a sustainable workplace by promoting spiritual well-being, it is necessary to empower and hold leaders and their teams accountable to act ethically and systemically (Macini et al., 2021), as this is the ideal mechanism for more organizations to achieve sustainability (Milliman & Ferguson, 2008; Mubashar et al., 2020). It is worth mentioning that people led by spiritual values are recognized for promoting more humane, creative, productive, and flexible workplaces (Eisler & Montuori, 2003; Parameshwar, 2005) through the recognition of the importance of positive social impact (Bandura, 2008; Samul, 2020a). Positive social impact is considered an important element in the development and promotion of proactive and healthy behaviors in the workplace (Bandura, 2008; Samul, 2020a).

Thus, the sustainable workplace emerges when the practices based on the leader's spiritual values aim to promote, create, and maintain initiatives aligned with the organization's greater purpose, aiming at spiritual well-being, which, in turn, impacts and is fed back by the commitment and productivity of people who relate to the organization (Samul, 2020a).

This environment promotes individual, team, and organizational benefits (Samul, 2020a). At the individual level, the sustainable workplace promoted by SL brings benefits such as a sense of life satisfaction, career self-development, engagement, and loyalty, and reduces absenteeism, turnover, and burnout, increasing personal productivity (George, 2006; Hunsaker, 2016; Hunsaker & Nam, 2017). These benefits can also be observed at the team level, where commitment, motivation, learning, and performance increase (Ritter, 2014; Saane, 2019). These benefits lead leaders and their teams to achieve operational and economic results while promoting initiatives aligned with organizational sustainability.

Thus, spiritual well-being is considered a fundamental and central goal for constructing and maintaining a sustainable workplace (Samul, 2020a). The leader plays a crucial role as the main influencer in people's relationship with spiritual well-being (Kelloway & Barling, 2010), as from it, leaders and their teams begin to feel intrinsically motivated (Deci, 1975). This occurs when their feelings of purpose and belonging are met, contributing more effectively to the implementation of the organizational strategy in a systemically sustainable workplace (Anser et al., 2021; Bandura, 2008; Samul, 2020a; Yang & Fry, 2018).

Therefore, a sustainable workplace can be understood as one that creates the ideal conditions for people to act systematically and holistically, considering the care for people, the organization, and the environment (Samul, 2020a; Stead & Stead, 2014). This implies seeking operational and economic results for the organization while promoting the spiritual well-being of people. These, in turn, feel committed to acting within the limits of their individual productivity to achieve the established results, basing their actions on ethics convergent with sustainability. Given this, the third assumption is presented: systematic interactions between leader, led, and the organization, through spiritual well-being, promote and maintain the sustainable workplace.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Throughout this essay, we have explored and endeavored to explain the connection and role of SL with sustainability, organizational culture, and the sustainable workplace. Based on these relationships, we have advanced in the quest to consolidate this information into a framework that assists in visualizing and fully understanding the connections of SL in organizations seeking sustainability. Figure 1 presents this framework based on the three assumptions in this work.

Figure 1. Conceptual Scheme of SL as a Promoter of Organizational Sustainability
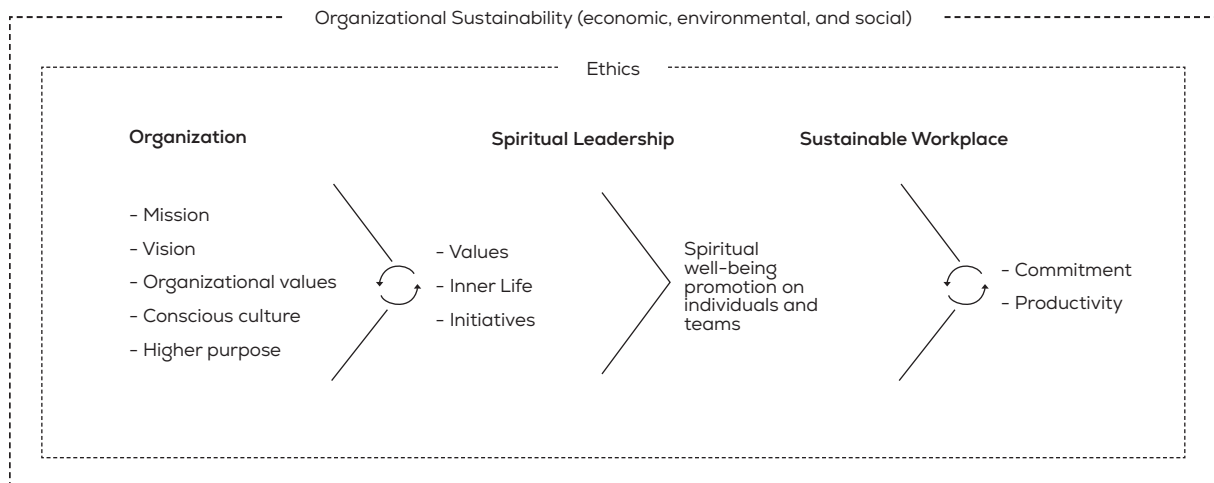
The scheme presents the organization and the essential strategic elements that must be aligned with the pillars of sustainability, driven by broader goals than profit, aiming for multidimensional outcomes (economic, social, environmental, and spiritual) (Legault, 2012; Mackey & Sisodia, 2014), establishing this orientation as its greater purpose, placed at the center of its strategy (Ahmad et al., 2018; Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Milliman et al., 2003). By using the vision as a guide for the values that shape a conscious organizational culture (Fry, 2003; Samul, 2020b; Schein, 1990), the organization is expected to promote spiritual values (Samul, 2020a).

This sustainability-oriented organizational environment can inspire and internally connect to SL (Samul, 2020a). The leader's inner life motivates people to act in a way that is aligned with the mission, vision, conscious organizational culture, and greater purpose of the organization (Samul, 2020a; Yang & Fry, 2018). This can be explained by psychological mechanisms, including 'developing the followers' self-efficacy and confidence, stimulating motivation, self-determination, and self-regulation (Bandura, 2008). Furthermore, through the realization of initiatives, practices, and ethical decisions aligned with sustainability, it is understood that SL can disseminate the conscious organizational culture, which influences and reinforces the organization's greater purpose (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014; Samul, 2020a).

Initiatives based on spiritual values adopted by SL can promote spiritual well-being through dimensions of physical and psychological health (Bandura, 2008; Samul, 2020a) based on ethics (Cashman, 1998; Fry, 2003). This context can create a workplace that allows the relationship between leader and led, generating a sense of purpose and belonging, constituting a sustainable workplace (Samul, 2020a). This environment interferes with and is fed back by the commitment and productivity of people who relate to the organization (Samul, 2020a).

Finally, this complex organizational direction and comprehensive initiatives by SL, guided by ethics, can generate benefits at three levels (individual, teams, and organization) (Samul, 2020a). Thus, it is understood that it is possible to contribute to the organization, society, and the environment, promoting organizational sustainability and advances in the 2030 Agenda (Fry, 2003; Macini et al., 2021; Oh & Wang, 2020; Samul, 2020a).

Thus, it is considered that SL can assume a central role in organizations seeking sustainability, acting as a link between organizational strategy, individuals, and teams through the promotion of a sustainable workplace.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we initially assert that leadership plays a crucial role in promoting organizational sustainability, thereby contributing to the advancement of the 2030 Agenda. We highlight SL as capable of making significant contributions in this regard by adopting a holistic approach to people. This approach considers the human being as an integrated whole (body, mind, heart, and spirit) in relation to the organization. Thus, the leader seeks the spiritual well-being of the followers, promotes positive social impact, assumes environmental responsibility, and creates harmony with the community, going beyond financial indicators. This represents our first theoretical contribution: SL as a catalyst for organizational sustainability, which may direct leadership training in organizations.

Advancing the discussion, we reaffirm the understanding that leaders who operate based on spiritual and ethical values can establish, through their influence, organizational practices aligned with sustainability. It is noteworthy that these characteristics assist in the selection, recruitment, or promotion of leaders within an organization.

This influence of SL manifests in the interaction with people and the adoption of sustainable attitudes, provoking behavioral changes that result in the spiritual well-being of individuals. Thus, the leader acts as a bridge that generates impacts not only at the individual level but also on teams and the organization. This is reflected in spiritual well-being, commitment, and productivity, constituting our second theoretical contribution.

This theoretical construction sought to understand the connection between SL and the development of a sustainable workplace, resulting in the third theoretical contribution of this research: the conceptual scheme of SL as a promoter of organizational sustainability (Figure 1). This scheme aims to offer a potential pathway that connects SL to the sustainable workplace,

a proposal not yet identified in the academic literature researched, and that may shed light on possible paths to adopt for organizational sustainability.

Beyond the theoretical contributions, the article presented empirical evidence on the contributions of the spiritual leader to sustainability. This evidence outlines concrete pathways of how SL can collaborate with the 2030 Agenda. We highlight contributions at the organizational level, such as the fundamental role of SL in stimulating employee creativity, promoting an innovative environment, and adopting sustainable practices (SDG 9). SL also influences organizational citizenship behavior, encouraging practices of energy conservation, waste reduction, and recycling, aligned with SDGs 14 and 15.

Other evidence stands out at the individual and team levels. When SL promotes a sustainable workplace, we observe benefits such as life satisfaction, career self-development, engagement, loyalty, and the reduction of absenteeism, turnover, and burnout, in addition to the increase in personal productivity. These benefits also extend to teams, with an elevation of commitment, motivation, learning, and performance (SDG 3).

However, direct empirical evidence on the contribution of spiritual leaders' actions to the 2030 Agenda is limited, indicating a gap for future research. We suggest that spiritual leaders can inspire well-being practices in the workplace, motivating their followers to act beyond organizational boundaries, adopting practices that directly contribute to the environment and society (SDGs 5, 7, 8, 12, 13).

Based on the theoretical construction presented, we believe that SL can identify and lead the necessary initiatives to face the challenges of sustainability and contribute to the recent developments of Goal 0, promoting a sustainable workplace. The promotion and stimulation of the development of skills and behaviors of spiritual leaders are crucial to advancing the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda in organizations, connecting the spiritual leader to the life purpose of their followers and society. However, these points lack more in-depth empirical studies.

The elucidations and theoretical connections presented here aim to guide empirical research related to identifying the values and initiatives necessary for the development of the spiritual leader in promoting a sustainable work environment. Such research should be grounded in the principles of SCT. As a first step in structuring the relationships presented in the theoretical scheme (Figure 1), something already considered complex, contextual factors in terms of spiritual values practices based on geographical and social influences were not addressed here. Therefore, we point out that one of the possible future research project paths is the refinement of the proposed scheme, considering the influences of spiritual values practices.

Furthermore, we aspire to contribute to and stimulate research on how the initiatives of spiritual leaders can impact the promotion of well-being, including the sense of purpose and belonging, in teams and the organization. We seek to shed light on how these aspects influence commitment and productivity in a sustainable workplace. We recognize that it will be challenging for researchers to develop methodologies that support these investigations in organizational settings, providing more practical and applied contributions to organizations.

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NOTE

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Marcela Pardo: Conceptualization; Data curation; funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – proofreading, and editing.
Tatiana Ghedine: Conceptualization; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Supervision; Validation; Writing – original draft.
Daniela Nunes: Conceptualization; Investigation; Methodology; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – proofreading, and editing.