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**ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN IMPLEMENTING CORPORATE PURPOSE:
CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of leaders in the implementation of corporate purpose in organisations. Corporate purpose describes a specific goal that goes beyond mere profit maximization. The results show that the personal vision and values of the leader are crucial for authentically anchoring the purpose. Transformational leadership strengthens the moral motivation of employees and increases their commitment. Ambidextrous leadership flexibly combines open and closed leadership styles to combine innovation and efficient implementation. Structured change management based on Lewin's model supports necessary behavioral changes and institutionalizes the purpose. Effective stakeholder management integrates external expectations and strengthens the legitimacy of the purpose. Finally, a value-based corporate culture promotes long-term identification and commitment. The analysis shows that implementing corporate purpose requires a combination of appropriate leadership styles, change management and a purpose-oriented culture; further research is needed to clarify the specific requirements and effects of different leadership approaches.*

Keywords: *Corporate Purpose; Leadership; Transformational Leadership; Ambidextrous Leadership; Leadership Roles*

INTRODUCTION

The simmering Middle East conflict, the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, the Volkswagen diesel scandal, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are just a few examples of global crises that have shaped the last two decades. Each of these crises illustrates how profoundly political, economic and ecological upheavals are changing the global landscape. In such times of upheaval, trust, both between individuals and within economic systems, is severely shaken. As a result, organizations tend to act as consumers of trust rather than generators of it (Hollensbe et al. 2014, p. 1227). Against this backdrop, corporate purpose emerges as a concept that has the potential to redefine the scope and scope of organizational activities (Hollensbe et al. 2014, p. 1228).

It has been acknowledged that corporate purpose has gained general interest in the general environment of serious global crises over the last couple of years (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 1). The need for the conceptualization of corporate purpose was identified and followed by several studies on how corporate purpose can best be described and what its relationship is to other organizational concepts, such as mission and vision. Tafuro and Piccaluga identified that this research still lacks an understanding of how corporate purpose becomes effective in practice (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 4).

Leaders play a critical role in implementing corporate purpose daily. However, to date, there has been little research into the role they play. This paper, therefore, examines the role leaders can play in implementing corporate purpose.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper follows an integrative review to examine the role of leadership in implementing corporate purpose from different perspectives. This approach allows the inclusion of empirical studies as well as conceptual contributions and practice-oriented literature.

The literature search was conducted in relevant scientific databases such as *Scopus*, *Web of*

Science and *Google Scholar*. Keywords such as *corporate purpose*, *leadership*, *transformational leadership*, *ambidextrous leadership*, *change management*, *stakeholder management* and *organizational culture* were used. In addition, key theoretical works and practical publications were taken into account in order to create as comprehensive a picture as possible.

The literature was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The focus was on identifying recurring subjects and conceptual overlaps between corporate purpose and various contemporary leadership approaches. In addition, contributions on change management, stakeholder management, and corporate culture were included to highlight the organizational framework conditions and practical implications.

In this way, the integrative review enables a link between theoretical foundations and practical concepts, which contributes both to the further development of scientific discourse and to the derivation of recommendations for action for leaders.

RESULTS

Corporate Purpose – Definition and Distinction

Historically, the purpose of organizations was centered towards profit maximization, particularly during the peak of the doctrine of maximizing shareholder value (Slintak and Dvorsky 2019, p. 16). Only in the last twenty years, the focus of purpose discussions moved towards creating a social value while maintaining a competitive advantage (Bratianu and Balanescu 2008, p. 19),

In recent years, loads of different interpretations of corporate purpose have been developed (Hurth, Ebert and Prabhu 2018, p. 7). Tafuro and Piccaluga acknowledged that the abstract nature of the concept of corporate purpose makes it difficult to define, but at the same time pointed out the need for conceptualizing corporate purpose (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 1). The diversity of definitions in recent years has led to the identification of three main perspectives in approaches to corporate purpose (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 2).

The first perspective considers the corporate purpose within the boundaries of the organization. From this point of view, the corporate purpose acts as a guiding force that provides orientation and directs the organization's actions, while at the same time ensuring strategic alignment. Alternatively, this perspective focuses primarily on the impact of corporate purpose on organizational viability. The second perspective extends the corporate purpose beyond the boundaries of the organization and highlights its social impact. It challenges the priority of profit maximization and instead favors solutions that align corporate goals with broader social progress. The third perspective positions the corporate purpose in relation to the common good. Furthermore, from this perspective, the organization could serve as a change agent to address global challenges (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 3).

The analysis by Tafuro and Piccaluga shows the extent to which research on corporate purpose has now progressed. As a uniform definition remains largely open, the following paper follows the definition by Henderson and van den Steen: “a concrete goal or objective for the firm that reaches beyond profit maximization“ (Henderson and van den Steen 2015, p. 327).

The recent research of Tafuro and Piccaluga clearly shows that corporate purpose has evolved from a purely economic model. Therefore, purpose cannot be anchored solely at the level of strategies, but it must be lived and communicated, which is where leadership needs to take over. Leaders are crucial in determining whether a corporate purpose becomes effective, whether through communicating goals, balancing short-term economic requirements with long-term social goals, or shaping a corporate culture that supports its purpose.

Against this backdrop, the following section focuses on the role of leadership. It examines key leadership concepts and approaches, such as transformational and ambidextrous leadership, change management, stakeholder management, and corporate culture, to show how leadership enables and shapes the implementation of corporate purpose.

Leadership – Definition and Distinction

Leadership fundamentally affects everyone in an organization, and anyone who positively influences the behavior of others is in a leadership position (Hinterhuber, Renzl and Werner 2012,

pp. 258–259). Today, there is an ongoing controversy regarding the difference between leadership and management. Both leadership and management entail working with people and are concerned with effective goal accomplishment (Northouse 2019, p. 53). However, leadership can be traced back to Aristotle, while management was developed in more recent history to reduce chaos in organizations (Northouse 2019, p. 53). Management provides order and consistency by mastering routines, whereas leadership drives change by influencing others and creating a vision for transformation (Northouse 2019 p. 54). Northouse summarized leadership as a process in which one person influences a group of people to achieve a common goal (Northouse 2019, p. 57). Yukl extended the definition of leadership: “Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.” (Yukl 2013, p. 7).

During the last decades, the content of leadership has not changed much; the fundamental behavior and actions have remained the same (Kouzes and Posner 2017, p. 27). It remains that an exemplary leader has to be able to imagine a future and communicate it to their subordinates (Kouzes and Posner 2017, p. 117). While the content of leadership has remained relatively stable, its context is continuously evolving, posing significant challenges for leaders. These challenges could be navigated by establishing a strong corporate purpose as a strategic baseline (Kouzes and Posner 2017, pp. 126–131).

For organizational effectiveness, long-term prosperity, and survival, organizations must adapt to their environment, including sudden changes (Yukl 2013, p. 277). The adaptation is enhanced by an accurate interpretation of the available information about the environment, while efficiency in this context means using all available resources to carry out essential operations in a way that minimizes costs and wasted efforts (Yukl 2013, p. 277). Therefore, a competitive strategy based on a corporate purpose, mission and vision should be formulated through change-oriented behavior and enacted daily by an exemplary leader (Yukl 2013, p. 279).

Role of Leaders in Implementing Corporate Purpose

As Bartlett and Ghoshal already pointed out in 1994, leaders are responsible for creating an organization that the members can identify with (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1994). Thus, leadership has a central role in formulating, defining and implementing the corporate purpose (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 8).

Furthermore, the personal purpose of the leader emerges as a central element in shaping the definition of corporate purpose (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 6). If the personal beliefs and core values of the leaders align with the corporate purpose, the corporate purpose might be enacted more authentically, and the personal beliefs can act as some kind of inter-personal glue and can hence strengthen employee commitment (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, pp. 6–7).

As an antecedent of implementing corporate purpose, the visionary leadership mindset has been identified (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 8). A visionary leader needs to be able to articulate a picture of the future that is both inspirational and realistic. Additionally, they need to translate a stable purpose into inspiring long-term objectives to mobilize employees to participate in goal achievement beyond short-term goals (Tafuro and Piccaluga 2025, p. 8).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership perceives. It emphasizes a dynamic exchange in which leaders shape the behavior of their followers while simultaneously being shaped by them, resulting in ongoing adjustments in response to acceptance or resistance (Yukl 1989, p. 271). At the core of this model lies the leader’s capacity to raise followers’ awareness of higher-order needs and moral values, thereby motivating them to move beyond self-interest in favor of organizational goals (Yukl 2013, p. 321).

Transformational leaders articulate an inspiring vision that not only underscores the necessity of change but also mobilizes employees to achieve results that exceed conventional expectations (Northouse 2019, pp. 264–273). Bass identifies four central dimensions of this leadership style: idealised influence, whereby leaders act as respected role models; inspirational motivation, through the communication of an engaging vision that elevates aspirations; intellectual stimula-

tion, which encourages critical reflection and innovation; and individualized consideration, where leaders respond to the unique needs of each follower with supportive guidance (Northouse 2019, pp. 270–272).

By adopting the role of mentor and advisor, transformational leaders build trust and empower their employees to participate actively in organizational transformation (Yukl 2013, p. 323). This leadership approach is widely acknowledged for its capacity to bring about profound shifts in members' attitudes and assumptions, thereby strengthening their alignment with the organisation's mission, values, and strategic objectives (Pundt and Nerdinger 2012, pp. 31–36).

Ambidextrous Leadership

The concept of ambidextrous leadership was first introduced in 2011 as a reaction to an inconclusive state of research on the relationship between leadership and innovation (Rosing and Zacher 2023). Leaders play a crucial role in today's economy in allocating and controlling organizational resources (Harandi, Khamseh and Sana 2024, p. 2) and the concept matches the complexity of organizational activities with an equally complex leadership approach (Kafetzopoulos 2022, p. 220).

In today's economy, leaders are required to efficiently handle their core business while simultaneously initiating innovations and new projects (Frehner 2023, p. 226). The concept acknowledges the engagement in two distinct types of leadership activities to achieve organizational ambidexterity (Kafetzopoulos 2022, p. 206).

Following the ambidextrous leadership approach, a leader must integrate two complementary behaviors that may appear contradictory, yet each provides the necessary context for either exploitation or exploration, resulting in a combination of the advantages of both leadership styles (Harandi, Khamseh and Sana 2024, p. 5). A leader should incorporate open and closed leadership styles and possess the ability to switch between them (Harandi, Khamseh and Sana 2024, p. 2). The open leadership style seeks to increase variance in employee behavior, thereby fostering creativity and supporting efforts to transform established processes (Rosing and Zacher 2023). On the contrary, the closed leadership style aims to reduce the variation in employee behavior to promote the implementation of specific instructions (Rosing and Zacher 2023). Both leadership styles combined foster innovation within an organization by stimulating exploratory behaviors while being in a controlled environment with a set goal (Harandi, Khamseh and Sana 2024, p. 7).

Change Management

In times of disruptions, organizations must manage change. The need for action is triggered by profound changes in the operating environment. These changes may or may not be accompanied by crises. Every change offers an opportunity for strategic renewal, to leverage the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and apply them to the new situation (Angerer and Roegner 2023, p. 5). It is important to focus on the attitudes of employees and on overcoming resistance to change (Angerer and Roegner 2023, p. 9).

Change management models serve as a compass throughout the whole change process. They facilitate or lead change efforts by determining the necessary processes and steps (Errida and Lotfi 2021, p. 2) and ensure that change records, planning, evaluation, authorization, prioritization, implementation and review are done in a controlled manner (Sarayreh, Khudair and Barakat 2013, p. 626).

Organizational change in general explains the movement of an organization from the current, known state to the desired, unknown state (Hussain et al. 2018, p. 123). Kurt Lewin was the first to develop a change management theory as a theoretical foundation of planned change management (Errida and Lotfi 2021, p. 2). He developed a change management model in which change is conceived as an alteration of existing strengths, while maintaining a three-stage framework to adapt to a repressing environment (Pawar and Charak 2017, pp. 79–80).

In the first stage, unfreeze, the main goal is to destabilize the equilibrium of the current state of the organization by removing the process that needs to be changed. In the second stage, move, the actual change is processed. Only after the change has been completed, the third stage, refreeze, can be performed. After the change is executed, it needs to be set as the new standard procedure (Pawar and Charak 2017, p. 80).

Lewin's change management model covers only three stages and thus remains at a highly abstract level. In subsequent years, additional models were developed; for example, Kotter introduced an eight-stage change management model. However, it must be acknowledged that most of these later models build upon the original Lewinian approach, which is why only this model is presented in this paper.

Stakeholder Management

In general, stakeholder management summarizes the shaping of an organization's relationship with its stakeholders (Kleb and Talaulicar 2022, p. 491). This is generally regarded as an organization's moral duty. It is important to differentiate between the claims of stakeholders in terms of interests, rights and property (Kleb and Talaulicar 2022, p. 492). Good stakeholder management and clear stakeholder communication are essential for an organization that wants to fulfil its responsibilities (Lautermann and Pfriem 2022, p. 537). A basis for this is knowing the expectations of stakeholders and taking them into account in every decision (Mayer 2020, p. 26).

Stakeholder management as it is practiced today is based on stakeholder theory, which was developed by Robert Freeman. The principle of the theory is that successful organizations create value for their stakeholders (Freeman, Harrison and Zyglidopoulos 2018, p. 2). The aim is to formulate, adapt and implement processes in such a way that all stakeholders are satisfied and the long-term success of the organization is assured (Freeman and McVea 2001, p. 10). The way in which stakeholder management is practiced has a direct influence on the value that an organization creates (Freeman, Harrison and Zyglidopoulos 2018, p. 3). Both economic and non-economic factors have an influence here, so that interactions must be taken into account (Freeman, Harrison and Zyglidopoulos 2018, p. 15).

Organizational Culture

Organizations are essentially social systems in which people collaborate over the long term (Nerdinger, Blickle and Schaper 2011, p. 143). Organizational culture refers to the unwritten rules that govern the behavior and integration of employees within the organization (Nerdinger, Blickle and Schaper 2011, p. 143).

All strategic statements that an organization issues contribute to the development of (unofficial) organizational culture (Altiok, 2011, p. 66). The culture influences all basic aspects of organizational life, including shared key values, standards, norms, beliefs and understandings that all members share (Altiok 2011, p. 66). Moreover, it reflects how the organization is perceived within its wider environment and plays a binding role in directing employees towards organizational objectives (Altiok 2011, p. 66).

Organizational culture is therefore closely linked to organizational identification, the point at which employees recognize themselves as members of the organization, associate specific feelings with it, and act in accordance with this association (van Dick 2017).

DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, the conceptual foundations of the role of leaders in implementing corporate purpose were discussed. Concerning corporate purpose, it is clear that the increasing complexity of the environment in which organizations operate means that established methods of leadership are no longer necessarily sufficient to meet current needs. Instead, agility must be increased, and this goes hand in hand with the agility of leaders.

In order to reconcile the speed of the environment with the stability of the organization, attempts are made to shape the strategy based on a construct consisting of mission, vision and corporate purpose. This allows the path to the goal to be adapted more flexibly, while the objectives remain fundamentally the same.

The discussion shows that traditional leadership models alone cannot sustain corporate purpose in today's complex environment. Leaders must combine a visionary mindset with the capacity to translate purpose into concrete, long-term goals that inspire employees. Transformational leadership contributes to this by raising employees' awareness of greater needs, promoting moral commitment and offering individual support, which strengthens the focus on purpose-driven strategies.

At the same time, ambidextrous leadership enables leaders to switch between open and closed behaviour, facilitating both innovation and the efficient implementation of targeted initiatives. This duality is essential for maintaining organizational agility while preserving the stability required to integrate goals into daily processes.

Effective change management, in particular Lewin's change management model, forms the procedural basis for a change in mindset and the institutionalization of goals across structures. Complementary stakeholder management ensures that the expectations of various interest groups are incorporated into the formulation of goals, thereby increasing legitimacy and long-term value creation.

Finally, a supportive corporate culture that reflects shared values and norms acts as a link between goals, leadership and employee identity, promoting commitment and identification with the organization's corporate purpose.

CONCLUSION

In summary, implementing corporate purpose demands a synergistic blend of transformational and ambidextrous leadership, rigorous change and stakeholder management, and a purpose-centric culture, collectively enabling organizations to navigate complexity while delivering social and economic value. Based on the discussed conceptual foundations, it has been shown that leadership holds a crucial role in implementing corporate purpose. However, as Tafuro and Piccaluga had already pointed out, there is a need to investigate how different leadership styles might shape corporate purpose. Furthermore, it remains an open question what additional requirements leaders will face when implementing corporate purpose within the organization. These open questions need to be clarified in further research.

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РОЛЯТА НА ЛИДЕРСТВОТО В ИЗПЪЛНЕНИЕТО НА КОРПОРАТИВНАТА ЦЕЛ: КОНЦЕПТУАЛНИ ОСНОВИ И ПРАКТИЧЕСКИ ПОСЛЕДИЦИ

Резюме: Тази статия разглежда ролята на лидерите при внедряването на корпоративната цел в организациите. Корпоративната цел описва специфична задача, която надхвърля простото максимизиране на печалбата. Резултатите показват, че личната визия и ценности на лидера са решаващи за автентичното целеполагане. Трансформационното лидерство засилва моралната мотивация на служителите и увеличава тяхната ангажираност. Амбидекстралното лидерство гъвкаво комбинира отворени и затворени лидерски стилове, за да съчетае иновацията и ефективното изпълнение. Структурираното управление на промяната, базирано на модела на Левин, подпомага необходимите поведенчески промени и институционализира целта. Ефективното управление на заинтересованите страни интегрира външните очаквания и засилва легитимността на целта. Накрая, ценностно ориентираната корпоративна култура насърчава дългосрочната идентифика-

ция и ангажираност. Анализът показва, че внедряването на корпоративната цел изисква комбинация от подходящи лидерски стилове, управление на промяната и култура, ориентирана към целта; необходими са допълнителни изследвания, за да се изяснят специфичните изисквания и ефекти на различните лидерски подходи.

Ключови думи: корпоративна цел; лидерство; трансформационно лидерство; амбидекстрално лидерство; лидерски роли

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