

Reinventing Leadership Models for Circular Economy Organizations: A Grounded Theory Perspective

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a grounded theory model explaining how leadership models are reinvented in organizations transitioning from linear value creation to circular economy systems. This qualitative study was conducted using a grounded theory approach. Participants included 24 senior managers, sustainability directors, operations managers, circular business model consultants, and innovation leaders from circular economy-oriented organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 75 minutes. Theoretical saturation was achieved after the twenty-first interview, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm category stability. Interview questions explored leadership experiences, decision-making processes, stakeholder coordination, resource-loop management, organizational culture, and barriers to circular transformation. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding with the support of NVivo software. Constant comparison, memo writing, member checking, and peer review were used to enhance trustworthiness. The analysis generated one central phenomenon: circular leadership reconfiguration. Five main categories were identified: regenerative strategic sensemaking, distributed ecosystem governance, circular capability orchestration, ambidextrous value-loop innovation, and accountability-based cultural embedding. The findings showed that leadership in circular economy organizations is not limited to top-down vision-setting; rather, it involves continuous coordination among internal units, external partners, suppliers, customers, regulators, and local communities. Participants emphasized that circular leaders must integrate economic viability, ecological responsibility, stakeholder legitimacy, and long-term resource stewardship. The study proposes a grounded theory model in which circular leadership emerges as a relational, systemic, and adaptive process. Reinventing leadership for circular economy organizations requires moving beyond hierarchical control toward ecosystem coordination, learning-oriented experimentation, and accountability for regenerative value creation.

Keywords: Circular economy; leadership model; grounded theory; sustainable leadership; circular business model; Tehran; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

The transition from a linear economy to a circular economy has become one of the most significant organizational challenges of the twenty-first century. The dominant linear model of “take, make, use, and dispose” has generated considerable economic growth, but it has also intensified resource depletion, waste accumulation, ecological degradation, and supply-chain vulnerability. In contrast, the circular economy proposes a regenerative model in which resources are kept in use for as long as possible, waste is minimized, materials are recovered, and value is created through reuse, repair, remanufacturing, recycling, sharing, and product-service systems. Scholars have emphasized that circular economy is not merely a technical waste-management strategy but a systemic transformation of production, consumption, business models, and institutional arrangements (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Ghisellini et al., 2016; Kirchherr et al., 2017). For organizations, this transformation requires new forms of



leadership capable of coordinating economic, environmental, technological, and social priorities across complex value networks.

The circular economy literature has grown rapidly during the last decade, yet much of this literature has focused on product design, industrial symbiosis, recycling systems, circular business models, and environmental performance. Bocken et al. (2016) introduced the influential distinction between slowing, closing, and narrowing resource loops, demonstrating that circularity requires both product-level redesign and business model innovation. Stahel (2016) similarly argued that preserving the value of goods, components, and materials requires a different relationship with resources and ownership. However, while these studies clarify what circular economy organizations should do, less attention has been given to how leaders guide organizations through the cultural, relational, and strategic changes required for circular transformation. Circular economy implementation is not simply an operational adjustment; it disrupts conventional assumptions about efficiency, growth, accountability, collaboration, and competitive advantage.

Leadership is central to this transition because circular economy organizations operate under conditions of complexity, interdependence, and uncertainty. In a linear organization, leadership often focuses on productivity, market growth, cost reduction, and internal performance control. In circular organizations, leaders must also manage reverse logistics, supplier collaboration, customer participation, regulatory demands, material traceability, environmental accountability, and ecosystem-level innovation. These demands exceed the boundaries of traditional hierarchical leadership models. Circular leadership must therefore be able to mobilize distributed knowledge, align multiple stakeholders, and create organizational commitment to long-term regenerative value. This aligns with complexity leadership theory, which views leadership as an enabling process that supports learning, adaptation, and innovation in complex adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Existing leadership theories provide useful but incomplete foundations for understanding leadership in circular economy organizations. Sustainable leadership emphasizes long-term orientation, stakeholder responsibility, organizational resilience, and the balancing of economic, social, and environmental goals (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). Responsible leadership highlights relational accountability and moral responsibility toward stakeholders inside and outside the organization (Maak & Pless, 2006). Leadership for sustainability further suggests that sustainability challenges require leaders to develop systems thinking, ethical reflexivity, and the capacity to operate in complex environments (Metcalf & Benn, 2013). These perspectives are highly relevant to circular economy organizations, but they do not fully explain the specific leadership processes through which organizations redesign value loops, redistribute decision-making authority, and coordinate circular ecosystems.

Circular economy transformation also requires a shift from firm-centered thinking to ecosystem-centered thinking. Korhonen et al. (2018) argued that circular economy is conceptually powerful but limited when treated as a vague collection of separate ideas rather than as a coherent systemic approach. This critique is particularly important for leadership research because circularity cannot be achieved through isolated managerial initiatives. A company cannot close material loops alone if suppliers, customers, logistics providers, policymakers, and recyclers are not aligned. Thus, circular leadership must operate beyond organizational boundaries. Leaders must negotiate shared standards, create trust among partners, encourage data sharing, manage conflicting interests, and develop governance arrangements that allow value to circulate across an ecosystem rather than remain locked inside a single firm.

Another important feature of circular economy organizations is the need for dynamic capabilities. Circular transformation requires sensing environmental and market changes, seizing circular business opportunities, and reconfiguring assets, processes, and partnerships. Teece et al. (1997) described dynamic capabilities as the capacity to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies in response to changing environments. In circular economy organizations, these capabilities are not purely technical; they are deeply leadership-dependent. Leaders must identify circular opportunities, legitimate experimentation, allocate resources to uncertain innovations, and transform organizational routines that were originally designed for linear efficiency. Without such leadership, circular economy strategies may remain symbolic or fragmented.

Business model innovation is another area where leadership plays a decisive role. Circular business models often challenge established revenue logics because they may involve leasing instead of selling, maintenance instead of replacement, recovery instead of disposal, and service-based value instead of product-based volume. These models require leaders to rethink profitability, customer relationships, product ownership, and performance measurement. Murray et al. (2017) argued that circular economy thinking has ethical and social dimensions as well as environmental and economic ones. This means that leadership must not only optimize resource flows but also clarify the moral and strategic purpose of circularity. Leaders must explain why circularity matters, how it creates value, and how employees can participate in its implementation.

Despite the theoretical relevance of leadership, empirical understanding of leadership reinvention in circular economy organizations remains limited, particularly in emerging economy contexts. Many circular economy frameworks are developed in European or highly industrialized contexts, where institutional support, environmental regulations, and circular infrastructure may be more advanced. In cities such as Tehran, circular economy organizations may face different challenges, including market instability, fragmented recycling infrastructure, regulatory inconsistency, limited consumer awareness, and resource constraints. These conditions make leadership especially important because leaders must compensate for institutional gaps, build informal partnerships, and sustain employee commitment despite uncertainty. Therefore, studying circular leadership in Tehran-based organizations can contribute to both leadership theory and circular economy implementation research.

A grounded theory approach is appropriate for this study because leadership reinvention in circular economy organizations is an emerging phenomenon that requires theory development rather than hypothesis testing. Grounded theory allows researchers to build conceptual explanations from participants' lived experiences, organizational practices, and interpretive meanings (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Through constant comparison and theoretical sampling, this method can reveal how leaders understand circularity, how they modify leadership practices, and how new organizational patterns emerge. In this study, grounded theory is used to identify the categories, relationships, conditions, strategies, and consequences associated with reinventing leadership models for circular economy organizations.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: How are leadership models reinvented in circular economy organizations, and what grounded theory model can explain the leadership processes that support circular transformation? The aim of this study was to develop a grounded theory model of leadership reinvention in circular economy organizations by exploring the experiences of managers, sustainability leaders, and circular business practitioners in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative grounded theory design to explore how leadership models are reinvented in circular economy organizations. Grounded theory was selected because the purpose of the study was not to test a predefined leadership model, but to generate an explanatory framework grounded in the experiences of organizational actors involved in circular economy transformation. The study followed the principles of open coding, axial coding, selective coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and memo writing, as recommended in grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The research setting consisted of Tehran-based organizations and consulting networks engaged in circular economy-related practices such as recycling, waste valorization, renewable resource use, circular product design, repair and maintenance systems, industrial reuse, reverse logistics, and sustainability-oriented innovation.

Participants included 24 individuals selected through purposive and theoretical sampling. The initial inclusion criteria were: having at least five years of managerial or professional experience, direct involvement in sustainability or circular economy-related activities, employment or professional activity in Tehran, and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. The participant group included chief executives, operations managers, sustainability managers, circular economy consultants, supply-chain managers, innovation directors, and senior experts working in manufacturing, recycling, food and packaging, construction materials, technology platforms, and sustainability consulting. Sampling began purposively to ensure the inclusion of information-rich participants and continued theoretically as emerging categories required additional clarification. Theoretical saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new conceptual categories emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the density and stability of the categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included open-ended questions such as: “How do you understand leadership in a circular economy organization?”, “What leadership practices are necessary for moving from a linear to a circular business model?”, “How are decisions made when circular goals conflict with short-term financial goals?”, “How do leaders coordinate suppliers, customers, regulators, and internal teams?”, and “What cultural changes are required for circular transformation?” Follow-up questions were used to clarify examples, contradictions, and meanings. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With participants’ permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymization of personal and organizational identifiers.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software. In the first stage, open coding was used to identify initial concepts from the interview transcripts. Codes such as “long-term resource thinking,” “supplier coordination,” “employee resistance,” “circular experimentation,” “waste as value,” “shared responsibility,” and “regulatory ambiguity” were extracted from the data. In the second stage, axial coding was used to group related codes into broader categories and to examine relationships among causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. In the third stage, selective coding was used to identify the central phenomenon and integrate the categories into a grounded theory model. The central phenomenon was labeled **circular leadership reconfiguration**, reflecting the process through which leaders reshape authority, strategy, culture, and stakeholder relations to support circular value creation.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through several procedures. Credibility was supported through member checking, in which selected participants reviewed summaries of the interpreted categories. Dependability was strengthened through documentation of coding decisions, analytic memos, and category development. Confirmability was addressed through peer review by two qualitative research experts who examined coding consistency and conceptual fit. Transferability was supported by providing thick description of the research context, participants, and organizational conditions. The final model was developed through continuous comparison between empirical data, emerging categories, and relevant theoretical literature

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that 24 individuals participated in the study, including 14 men and 10 women. In terms of age, 5 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 9 were between 36 and 45 years old, 7 were between 46 and 55 years old, and 3 were older than 55 years. Regarding educational level, 4 participants held a bachelor's degree, 15 held a master's degree, and 5 held a doctoral degree. In terms of professional role, 6 participants were senior executives, 5 were sustainability or environmental managers, 4 were operations or supply-chain managers, 4 were innovation and business development managers, 3 were circular economy consultants, and 2 were senior policy or industry experts. The sectoral distribution included manufacturing firms ($n = 7$), recycling and waste management organizations ($n = 5$), food and packaging companies ($n = 3$), construction and materials companies ($n = 4$), technology-based platforms ($n = 3$), and sustainability consulting organizations ($n = 2$). Participants' professional experience ranged from 6 to 28 years.

The analysis resulted in one central phenomenon and five main categories. The central phenomenon was **circular leadership reconfiguration**. This concept refers to the process by which leaders move beyond conventional command-and-control models and develop new leadership practices based on regeneration, stakeholder coordination, capability development, experimentation, and accountability. The five main categories were: regenerative strategic sensemaking, distributed ecosystem governance, circular capability orchestration, ambidextrous value-loop innovation, and accountability-based cultural embedding.

Regenerative strategic sensemaking was the first main category. Participants explained that leadership in circular economy organizations begins with reframing how the organization understands value, waste, resources, and responsibility. In linear business models, value is often measured through output volume, sales growth, and cost efficiency. In circular organizations, leaders must help employees reinterpret waste as a resource, customers as participants in value loops, and environmental responsibility as a strategic capability. One participant stated, "The first change was mental. We had to stop saying waste is the end of the process. Our CEO repeatedly said waste is an unfinished business opportunity" (P6, sustainability manager). Another participant noted, "People understood recycling as charity or compliance, not as strategy. Leadership changed the language from environmental burden to future competitiveness" (P11, innovation director). This category included the subcategories of circular visioning, ecological interpretation of business risk, long-term resource orientation, and reframing value creation.

Distributed ecosystem governance was the second main category. Participants emphasized that circular economy leadership cannot remain confined within the boundaries of the firm because circularity depends on suppliers, customers, logistics providers, recyclers, municipalities, regulators, and industry partners. Leaders were

required to build trust-based networks, negotiate shared standards, and create mechanisms for collaboration across the value chain. One participant explained, “We discovered that no internal department could solve circularity alone. Even the best design fails if suppliers do not cooperate or customers do not return the product” (P3, operations manager). Another stated, “Leadership became more about connecting actors than giving orders. We had to sit with suppliers, waste collectors, and even competitors” (P18, circular economy consultant). This category consisted of stakeholder alignment, interorganizational trust, cross-sector collaboration, shared decision-making, and network-based coordination.

Circular capability orchestration was the third main category. Participants described leadership as the ability to mobilize and combine technical, human, digital, and relational capabilities for circular transformation. Circular economy projects required new competencies in material tracking, reverse logistics, life-cycle thinking, eco-design, supplier auditing, customer education, and data-based monitoring. Leaders played an important role in identifying capability gaps and creating learning processes. One participant stated, “We had machines and engineers, but we did not have circular thinking. The leader’s job was to connect engineering knowledge with environmental knowledge and market knowledge” (P9, production manager). Another participant explained, “Training was not enough. We needed new routines, new indicators, and new conversations between departments” (P15, supply-chain manager). This category included capability mapping, cross-functional learning, digital traceability, knowledge integration, employee empowerment, and resource reconfiguration.

Ambidextrous value-loop innovation was the fourth main category. Participants reported that circular leaders must balance exploitation and exploration. On the one hand, organizations must maintain existing operations and financial stability; on the other hand, they must experiment with uncertain circular models such as product take-back, reuse platforms, recycled materials, repair services, leasing, and industrial symbiosis. This created tensions between short-term profitability and long-term circular innovation. One participant stated, “Every circular idea had two questions: will it reduce waste, and will it survive financially? Leadership had to protect experiments from being killed too early” (P21, business development manager). Another participant said, “Circular innovation is not a straight line. Some pilots failed, but they taught us how customers think about returning, repairing, and reusing” (P4, technology platform founder). This category included circular experimentation, pilot projects, risk tolerance, business model redesign, financial-ecological balancing, and learning from failure.

Accountability-based cultural embedding was the fifth main category. Participants emphasized that circular economy leadership becomes effective only when circular principles are embedded in organizational culture, performance indicators, routines, and accountability systems. Leaders had to move circularity from symbolic statements to everyday practices. This required changing reward systems, procurement criteria, reporting mechanisms, meeting agendas, and employee expectations. One participant stated, “When circularity was only a slogan, nobody changed behavior. When managers asked about material recovery in every meeting, people understood that it was real” (P13, environmental manager). Another participant explained, “Culture changed when employees saw that waste reduction, repair, and reuse were part of evaluation, not extra work” (P8, human resource manager). This category included circular performance measurement, ethical accountability, employee participation, cultural normalization, and leadership role modeling.

The grounded theory model developed from the findings suggests that leadership reinvention in circular economy organizations is triggered by causal conditions such as resource scarcity, environmental pressure, stakeholder expectations, regulatory uncertainty, and dissatisfaction with linear business models. These conditions

push leaders to reinterpret organizational purpose and value creation. Contextual conditions such as market volatility, infrastructure limitations, customer awareness, and industry norms shape the difficulty of circular transformation. Intervening conditions such as leadership commitment, organizational learning capacity, digital readiness, and stakeholder trust influence whether circular strategies succeed or remain symbolic. The main leadership strategies include strategic sensemaking, ecosystem governance, capability orchestration, circular innovation, and cultural embedding. The consequences include improved circular readiness, stronger stakeholder legitimacy, enhanced innovation capacity, reduced waste, better resource efficiency, and a more resilient organizational identity.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that leadership reinvention in circular economy organizations is best understood as **circular leadership reconfiguration**, a systemic process through which leaders reshape meaning, authority, capability, innovation, and accountability. This result supports the argument that circular economy is not merely a technical or environmental program but a systemic organizational transformation. Kirchherr et al. (2017) showed that circular economy definitions often emphasize reduce, reuse, and recycle activities but may understate the systemic shift required. The present study extends this view by demonstrating that the systemic shift also requires a leadership shift. Circular economy organizations need leaders who can translate circularity into strategic meaning, coordinate interdependent actors, and institutionalize regenerative practices. This finding also aligns with Geissdoerfer et al. (2017), who positioned circular economy as a sustainability paradigm involving deep changes in value creation and resource use.

The first main category, regenerative strategic sensemaking, indicates that circular leadership begins with changing the organization's interpretation of value and waste. Participants described leadership as a process of reframing circularity from an environmental obligation into a strategic and competitive logic. This finding is consistent with Bocken et al. (2016), who argued that circular business models require strategies for slowing, closing, and narrowing resource loops. However, the present study adds that these strategies depend on leaders' ability to create shared meaning around why circularity matters. When employees continue to understand waste as an operational residue rather than a potential source of value, circular initiatives remain peripheral. This result also supports Metcalf and Benn's (2013) view that sustainability leadership requires advanced cognitive and interpretive abilities because sustainability challenges are complex and ambiguous. In circular economy organizations, leaders must make ecological, economic, and social logics understandable to employees and stakeholders.

The second main category, distributed ecosystem governance, showed that circular economy leadership is inherently relational and boundary-spanning. Participants repeatedly emphasized that no single organization can achieve circularity alone. This finding is aligned with Maak and Pless's (2006) responsible leadership perspective, which defines leadership as a relational process involving accountability to multiple stakeholders. It also supports circular economy studies that emphasize the importance of interorganizational collaboration, reverse supply chains, and value-network redesign (Ghisellini et al., 2016; Ranta et al., 2018). The contribution of this study is to show that ecosystem governance is not an optional leadership behavior but a core requirement of circular transformation. Leaders must create collaborative structures among suppliers, customers, recyclers, regulators,

and internal departments. This finding challenges traditional firm-centric leadership models and suggests that leadership effectiveness in circular economy organizations should be evaluated partly by the quality of ecosystem coordination.

The third main category, circular capability orchestration, revealed that leadership reinvention requires the integration of technical, digital, human, and relational capabilities. Participants described circular transformation as a learning process involving eco-design, reverse logistics, data traceability, employee training, supplier development, and cross-functional coordination. This finding is consistent with the dynamic capabilities perspective of Teece et al. (1997), which emphasizes sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring competencies in changing environments. Circular economy organizations must sense resource risks and market opportunities, seize circular business possibilities, and reconfigure organizational routines around material loops and regenerative value. The study extends dynamic capability theory by showing that leadership acts as the orchestrating mechanism through which circular capabilities are identified, connected, and embedded. Without leadership, circular capabilities remain fragmented across departments and fail to produce systemic transformation.

The fourth main category, ambidextrous value-loop innovation, showed that circular leaders must balance operational stability with circular experimentation. Participants reported tensions between short-term financial performance and long-term circular innovation. This finding is consistent with the circular business model literature, which shows that circular transformation often requires experimentation with product-service systems, leasing, reuse, remanufacturing, and repair models (Bocken et al., 2016; Stahel, 2016). The present study adds that leaders must protect early-stage circular experiments from premature rejection by conventional financial metrics. Circular innovation often produces uncertain results because customer behavior, supplier readiness, cost structures, and regulatory conditions may not be fully predictable. Therefore, circular leaders require ambidextrous judgment: they must sustain existing business performance while creating protected spaces for circular pilots and learning. This finding supports complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes adaptive capacity, experimentation, and emergence in complex organizational systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

The fifth main category, accountability-based cultural embedding, showed that circular leadership becomes sustainable only when circular values are translated into routines, indicators, and accountability systems. Participants emphasized that circularity fails when it remains a symbolic slogan or isolated project. This finding aligns with sustainable leadership theory, which emphasizes long-term orientation, ethical responsibility, employee development, and organizational resilience (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). It also supports Murray et al.'s (2017) argument that circular economy has ethical and social dimensions, not only technical or economic dimensions. The present study contributes by showing that cultural embedding requires concrete managerial mechanisms: performance indicators, procurement rules, meeting routines, reward systems, and role modeling. Leaders must institutionalize circular expectations so that employees understand circularity as part of normal work rather than additional environmental labor.

Overall, the findings suggest that circular economy organizations require a leadership model that differs from conventional transactional, bureaucratic, and purely transformational models. Traditional leadership models often assume that leaders influence followers within a relatively bounded organization. In contrast, circular leadership operates across organizational boundaries, resource loops, stakeholder systems, and temporal horizons. It is strategic because it redefines value; relational because it coordinates ecosystems; developmental because it builds capabilities; adaptive because it supports experimentation; and ethical because it embeds accountability for

environmental and social consequences. This integrated model contributes to leadership literature by connecting sustainable leadership, responsible leadership, complexity leadership, and dynamic capabilities within the specific context of circular economy transformation.

The findings also have implications for emerging economy contexts such as Tehran. Participants described challenges related to infrastructure, regulatory ambiguity, market instability, and limited circular awareness. These contextual barriers suggest that circular leadership may be especially important where formal institutions and circular infrastructures are still developing. In such contexts, leaders must act not only as internal change agents but also as institutional entrepreneurs who build partnerships, educate stakeholders, and create practical solutions despite environmental constraints. This extends Korhonen et al.'s (2018) critique that circular economy remains conceptually and practically limited when systemic conditions are weak. The present study shows that leadership can partially compensate for these limitations by creating meaning, trust, capability, and experimentation.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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