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The Evolution of Organizational Governance and Leadership Systems Toward Sustainability-Oriented Enterprises

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a qualitative understanding of how organizational governance and leadership systems evolve toward sustainability-oriented enterprises in the context of Tehran-based organizations. The study adopted a qualitative grounded theory design to explore the organizational, managerial, and governance mechanisms through which enterprises move from compliance-oriented sustainability practices toward embedded sustainability-oriented governance. Participants included 24 senior managers, board members, sustainability officers, strategy executives, human resource managers, and operations leaders from medium and large organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling based on their direct involvement in strategic decision-making, governance reform, sustainability initiatives, or organizational transformation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 75 minutes. Interview questions addressed governance structures, leadership practices, stakeholder engagement, sustainability accountability, cultural change, and barriers to institutionalizing sustainability. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved after the 21st interview, with three additional interviews conducted to confirm the stability of the emerging categories. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding supported by NVivo software. The analysis produced five main categories: shifting from compliance-based governance to purpose-driven governance, distributing sustainability leadership across organizational levels, integrating sustainability metrics into strategic decision-making, expanding stakeholder-oriented accountability, and developing learning-based transition capabilities. The findings indicated that sustainability-oriented enterprises do not emerge through isolated environmental programs but through systemic changes in governance logic, leadership identity, decision criteria, performance measurement, and stakeholder relationships. Participants emphasized that sustainability becomes organizationally meaningful only when it is embedded in board agendas, leadership routines, incentive systems, interdepartmental coordination, and long-term strategic planning. The study suggests that the evolution toward sustainability-oriented enterprises requires a transition from symbolic sustainability adoption to governance-embedded sustainability. This transition depends on responsible leadership, participatory governance, integrated performance systems, stakeholder accountability, and continuous organizational learning.

Keywords: organizational governance; sustainable leadership; sustainability-oriented enterprise; qualitative research; grounded theory; corporate sustainability; Tehran

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1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a central concern in contemporary organizational governance and leadership because enterprises are increasingly expected to create economic value while simultaneously addressing environmental limits, social responsibility, stakeholder legitimacy, and long-term institutional resilience. Earlier managerial models treated sustainability as a peripheral issue associated with philanthropy, regulatory compliance, or reputational communication. However, the growing complexity of climate risks, resource scarcity, social inequality, stakeholder activism, and environmental, social, and governance expectations has transformed sustainability into a strategic and governance-level concern. In this context, organizations are no longer evaluated only by financial performance, market share, and operational efficiency, but also by their capacity to integrate

social and ecological responsibility into their decision-making systems, leadership practices, accountability mechanisms, and organizational identity (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Eccles et al., 2014; Elkington, 1997).

The evolution toward sustainability-oriented enterprises reflects a broader shift in the theory and practice of the firm. Traditional governance models have often emphasized shareholder value, managerial control, hierarchical authority, and short-term financial accountability. Although these models remain influential, they are increasingly inadequate for organizations operating in environments characterized by interdependence, uncertainty, ecological constraint, and plural stakeholder demands. Stakeholder theory challenged narrow shareholder-centered assumptions by arguing that firms are embedded in networks of relationships with employees, customers, suppliers, communities, governments, and broader society (Freeman, 1984). From this perspective, governance cannot be reduced to the protection of investor interests; rather, it must balance the legitimate claims of multiple stakeholders whose cooperation and trust are essential for organizational continuity.

Corporate sustainability extends this stakeholder logic by emphasizing the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental integrity. Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) argued that corporate sustainability requires organizations to satisfy direct and indirect stakeholder needs without compromising the ability of future stakeholders to meet their own needs. This view moves beyond the business case for sustainability by suggesting that enterprises must not only use sustainability to improve profitability but also redesign their governance and leadership systems around long-term responsibility. Similarly, Hart's (1995) natural-resource-based view proposed that environmental capabilities can become strategic resources, particularly when firms develop pollution prevention, product stewardship, and sustainable development capabilities. Thus, sustainability-oriented enterprises are not merely organizations that adopt environmental policies; they are organizations that reconfigure strategy, governance, leadership, capabilities, and organizational learning around sustainability principles.

The governance dimension of sustainability is particularly important because isolated initiatives rarely produce durable organizational transformation. Organizations may publish sustainability reports, establish environmental committees, or implement corporate social responsibility programs without changing the underlying logic of decision-making. Such symbolic adoption can create a gap between formal sustainability commitments and actual governance behavior. Eccles et al. (2014) showed that high-sustainability companies differed from low-sustainability companies in organizational processes, stakeholder engagement, board oversight, incentive systems, and long-term orientation. This finding suggests that sustainability performance is associated not only with values or communication but also with structural and procedural features of governance. When sustainability is incorporated into board agendas, executive compensation, risk management, strategic planning, and performance measurement, it becomes part of the organization's operating system rather than an external communication device.

Leadership is equally central to this transformation. Sustainable leadership refers to leadership practices that promote long-term organizational viability, ethical responsibility, stakeholder inclusion, human development, innovation, and resilience (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Hallinger & Suriyankietkaew, 2018). Unlike leadership models focused primarily on charismatic influence, control, or short-term performance, sustainable leadership emphasizes continuity, collective capacity, distributed responsibility, and intergenerational accountability. Metcalf and Benn (2013) argued that leadership for sustainability requires an evolution in leadership ability because sustainability challenges are complex, systemic, ambiguous, and value-laden. Leaders must therefore

move beyond command-and-control approaches and develop capacities for systems thinking, stakeholder dialogue, ethical judgment, paradox management, and collaborative problem-solving.

The relationship between governance and leadership is especially significant in sustainability transitions. Governance provides formal structures of accountability, authority, policy, control, and decision rights, while leadership shapes meaning, commitment, interpretation, culture, and collective action. Governance without sustainability-oriented leadership may produce bureaucratic compliance without genuine transformation. Leadership without governance integration may produce inspiring sustainability narratives without institutional durability. Sustainability-oriented enterprises require alignment between the two: governance systems must create formal accountability for sustainability, and leadership systems must create cultural, relational, and interpretive capacity for sustainability to become a shared organizational priority.

The evolution of governance and leadership systems also requires organizations to address competing tensions. Sustainability often creates tensions between short-term profit and long-term resilience, efficiency and responsibility, central control and stakeholder participation, financial metrics and social value, local adaptation and global standards, and innovation and risk management. Bansal (2005) showed that corporate sustainable development is shaped by institutional, resource-based, and organizational factors, indicating that sustainability emerges through the interaction of external pressures and internal capabilities. Similarly, Aguinis and Glavas (2012) argued that corporate social responsibility operates across institutional, organizational, and individual levels. These multilevel dynamics imply that sustainability-oriented governance cannot be explained only by regulation, only by managerial values, or only by market incentives. It emerges through the interaction of external legitimacy pressures, internal strategic capabilities, leadership interpretation, stakeholder relationships, and organizational culture.

Another important aspect of sustainability-oriented enterprise evolution is the politicization of corporate responsibility. Scherer and Palazzo (2011) argued that firms increasingly assume social and political responsibilities in contexts where national regulation and global governance are insufficient to address complex societal problems. This does not mean that firms replace governments, but it does mean that enterprises are expected to participate in broader systems of accountability, public deliberation, and responsible governance. Consequently, organizational governance must expand from internal control toward external accountability and social legitimacy. Leaders must understand that sustainability is not merely a technical matter of environmental management but also a moral, political, and relational matter involving trust, transparency, fairness, and stakeholder voice.

Despite the growing literature on sustainability leadership, corporate sustainability, and responsible governance, there remains a need for qualitative research that explains how governance and leadership systems evolve in organizational practice. Much of the existing literature has examined sustainability performance, reporting, corporate social responsibility, or leadership styles through conceptual, quantitative, or review-based approaches. Less attention has been given to the lived experiences of managers and organizational actors who participate in sustainability transitions, particularly in emerging-market urban contexts such as Tehran. Tehran-based organizations operate within a complex institutional environment characterized by regulatory pressures, economic uncertainty, resource constraints, stakeholder expectations, and increasing attention to environmental and social responsibility. These conditions make Tehran a meaningful context for examining how organizations interpret and operationalize sustainability-oriented governance.

Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for this topic because the evolution of governance and leadership systems is a processual, interpretive, and context-dependent phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore how leaders understand sustainability, how governance structures are modified, how conflicts are negotiated, and how sustainability becomes embedded or resisted within organizational routines. A grounded theory perspective is particularly useful because it enables theory development from participants' accounts rather than imposing a predetermined framework. This approach can reveal the categories, mechanisms, tensions, and conditions through which sustainability-oriented enterprises emerge.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to explain how organizational governance and leadership systems evolve toward sustainability-oriented enterprises by analyzing the experiences of Tehran-based managers and organizational decision-makers involved in governance, strategy, sustainability, and leadership transformation.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative grounded theory design to explore the evolution of organizational governance and leadership systems toward sustainability-oriented enterprises. A qualitative approach was selected because the research objective required an in-depth understanding of meanings, processes, interpretations, and organizational mechanisms rather than numerical measurement of predefined variables. Grounded theory was appropriate because the study aimed to develop an explanatory model of sustainability-oriented governance and leadership evolution from participants' experiences and interpretations.

The study population consisted of senior managers, board members, sustainability officers, strategic planning directors, human resource managers, operations managers, and organizational development consultants working with medium and large enterprises in Tehran. The inclusion criteria were: having at least five years of managerial or professional experience, direct involvement in governance, strategic planning, sustainability initiatives, organizational transformation, human resource development, risk management, or stakeholder engagement, and willingness to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview. Participants who had no direct knowledge of organizational governance or sustainability-related decision-making were excluded.

A total of 24 participants were included in the study. Purposive sampling was used at the beginning of the research to select information-rich participants with direct experience in governance and sustainability-related organizational change. As the analysis progressed, theoretical sampling was applied to select additional participants who could clarify emerging categories, elaborate contradictory cases, and deepen the developing conceptual model. Theoretical saturation was achieved after the 21st interview, when no substantially new categories, properties, or relationships emerged from the data. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on the study objective and the literature on corporate sustainability, sustainable leadership, stakeholder governance, and organizational transformation. The interview questions were open-ended and designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences in detail. Sample questions included: "How has the meaning of sustainability changed in your organization?" "What governance mechanisms support or limit sustainability-oriented decision-making?" "How do leaders influence the integration of sustainability into organizational strategy?" "What role do

stakeholders play in shaping sustainability decisions?" and "What barriers prevent sustainability from becoming part of the organization's governance system?"

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a private and convenient setting or through secure online communication when face-to-face access was not possible. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also prepared after each interview to document contextual observations, preliminary interpretations, and emerging analytical insights. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing early findings to guide subsequent interviews. This iterative process supported theoretical sampling and helped refine the emerging categories.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were assigned codes such as P1, P2, and P3. All files were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

Data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, retrieve coded segments, compare categories, and support analytical memo writing. In the open coding stage, transcripts were read line by line to identify initial concepts related to governance change, leadership practices, sustainability accountability, stakeholder involvement, organizational culture, and strategic decision-making. Similar codes were grouped into preliminary categories.

In the axial coding stage, relationships among categories were examined. The analysis focused on conditions, actions, interactions, consequences, and contextual factors. For example, codes related to board-level attention, executive incentives, and sustainability reporting were grouped under governance institutionalization, whereas codes related to shared responsibility, middle-manager engagement, and cross-functional coordination were grouped under distributed sustainability leadership. In the selective coding stage, the main categories were integrated around the central phenomenon of governance-embedded sustainability orientation.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were used. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking with selected participants, and comparison of interpretations across interviews. Dependability was strengthened through maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, memos, and category development. Confirmability was supported by reflexive memo writing to reduce the influence of researcher assumptions. Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, and analytical process.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants indicated diversity in gender, age, education, organizational role, and sector. Of the 24 participants, 14 were male and 10 were female. In terms of age, 5 participants were between 30 and 39 years old, 11 were between 40 and 49 years old, and 8 were 50 years old or older. Regarding education, 6 participants held a bachelor's degree, 13 held a master's degree, and 5 held a doctoral degree. In terms of organizational role, 5 participants were board members or executive directors, 6 were senior managers, 4 were sustainability or corporate social responsibility officers, 4 were human resource or organizational development managers, 3 were operations or supply chain managers, and 2 were strategy consultants. The participants represented organizations operating in manufacturing, energy, finance, technology, construction,

retail, and professional services. This distribution provided a broad basis for understanding sustainability-oriented governance and leadership evolution across different organizational settings in Tehran.

Shifting from compliance-based governance to purpose-driven governance. The first main category showed that participants perceived sustainability evolution as a movement from minimum compliance toward purpose-driven governance. In the early stage, sustainability was often understood as meeting legal requirements, avoiding penalties, responding to public pressure, or producing formal reports. However, participants explained that sustainability became more meaningful when it was connected to the organization's mission, long-term legitimacy, risk management, and social responsibility. One participant stated, "At first, sustainability was just a checklist for us. Later, the board realized that environmental and social risks were not external issues; they were part of our survival and identity" (P4). Another participant noted, "When sustainability entered the strategy meetings, the conversation changed from 'what must we report?' to 'what kind of organization do we want to become?'" (P11). This category indicates that governance evolution begins when sustainability is reframed from a peripheral obligation into a strategic and identity-based principle.

Distributing sustainability leadership across organizational levels. The second main category revealed that sustainability-oriented enterprises require leadership beyond the chief executive or formal sustainability department. Participants emphasized that sustainability implementation fails when it is concentrated in a single unit or attached only to symbolic leadership messages. Effective transformation occurred when responsibility was distributed across departments, middle managers, project teams, and operational employees. A senior manager explained, "The CEO can announce sustainability, but the production manager, procurement team, and HR department decide whether it becomes real or remains a slogan" (P7). Similarly, a sustainability officer stated, "We learned that sustainability leadership is not one person's charisma; it is a network of people who translate the idea into daily decisions" (P16). This category suggests that leadership systems evolve when sustainability becomes a shared managerial capability rather than a specialized function.

Integrating sustainability metrics into strategic decision-making. The third category concerned the integration of sustainability indicators into planning, budgeting, investment, performance evaluation, and risk assessment. Participants reported that sustainability remained weak when measured separately from mainstream performance systems. However, when environmental, social, and governance indicators were included in dashboards, executive reviews, supplier evaluation, project selection, and incentive systems, sustainability gained organizational power. One participant observed, "People pay attention to what the system measures. When energy use, waste, employee safety, and stakeholder complaints became part of our monthly dashboard, managers started to treat them seriously" (P2). Another participant said, "The turning point was when investment proposals had to include social and environmental consequences, not just financial return" (P19). This category demonstrates that sustainability-oriented governance depends on measurement integration; without it, sustainability remains rhetorical and vulnerable to short-term financial pressures.

Expanding stakeholder-oriented accountability. The fourth category showed that the evolution toward sustainability-oriented enterprises involves a shift from internal accountability to stakeholder-oriented accountability. Participants described growing pressure from employees, customers, regulators, local communities, investors, suppliers, and civil society. However, they also noted that stakeholder engagement becomes meaningful only when organizations create mechanisms for listening, dialogue, response, and transparency. One participant stated, "Before, we thought accountability meant reporting upward to shareholders.

Now we understand that communities, employees, and customers also evaluate our legitimacy" (P9). Another participant explained, "Stakeholder meetings were uncomfortable at first because people criticized us directly. But those conversations helped us see risks that internal reports never showed" (P21). This category indicates that sustainability-oriented governance expands the boundaries of accountability and requires enterprises to treat stakeholders as sources of knowledge, legitimacy, and strategic guidance.

Developing learning-based transition capabilities. The fifth category reflected the importance of organizational learning, experimentation, and adaptation. Participants emphasized that sustainability transformation is not a linear implementation of fixed policies but an ongoing learning process involving trial, error, resistance, revision, and capability development. Organizations had to learn how to manage cross-functional tensions, educate managers, redesign routines, negotiate trade-offs, and create new competencies. One participant said, "We made many mistakes. We started with isolated projects, but gradually learned that sustainability requires changing procurement, training, reporting, and even how managers define success" (P13). Another participant noted, "The biggest change was cultural. People needed time to understand that sustainability was not against profitability; it was a different way of thinking about long-term value" (P5). This category suggests that sustainability-oriented enterprises emerge through cumulative learning capabilities rather than one-time structural reform.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the evolution of organizational governance and leadership systems toward sustainability-oriented enterprises is a systemic process that begins with a shift from compliance-based governance to purpose-driven governance. Participants described an early stage in which sustainability was mainly associated with legal compliance, external reporting, reputation management, or risk avoidance. This finding is consistent with Dyllick and Hockerts' (2002) argument that corporate sustainability should not be reduced to eco-efficiency or narrow business-case reasoning. A sustainability-oriented enterprise requires deeper integration of economic, social, and ecological responsibility into the organization's purpose and governance logic. Similarly, Eccles et al. (2014) showed that high-sustainability companies differ from low-sustainability companies not only in stated values but also in governance processes, stakeholder engagement, and long-term organizational practices. The present findings extend this literature by showing that managers experience sustainability evolution as a change in the meaning of governance itself: from controlling compliance to defining the organization's long-term responsibility, legitimacy, and identity. This also aligns with stakeholder theory, which argues that organizations must consider the legitimate interests of multiple stakeholders rather than treating shareholder value as the only governance criterion (Freeman, 1984).

The second category, distributed sustainability leadership, demonstrates that sustainability-oriented transformation cannot depend exclusively on top management commitment or formal sustainability departments. Participants emphasized that sustainability becomes operational only when leadership responsibility is distributed across functions and hierarchical levels. This finding is aligned with Avery and Bergsteiner's (2011) concept of sustainable leadership, which emphasizes long-term orientation, people development, ethical behavior, knowledge sharing, and organizational resilience. It also supports Metcalf and Benn's (2013) argument that leadership for sustainability requires an evolution of leadership ability because sustainability problems are

complex, systemic, and ambiguous. The findings suggest that sustainability leadership should be understood as a collective organizational capability rather than a personal leadership style. Senior leaders create direction and legitimacy, but middle managers and operational teams translate sustainability into procurement, production, human resources, budgeting, customer relations, and supplier management. Therefore, sustainability-oriented leadership systems must combine executive commitment with distributed agency, cross-functional collaboration, and employee participation.

The third category, integrating sustainability metrics into strategic decision-making, shows that sustainability becomes institutionally powerful only when it is embedded in formal performance systems. Participants repeatedly stated that managers respond to what is measured, reviewed, rewarded, and reported. This finding supports the argument that sustainability must be incorporated into organizational processes rather than treated as a separate communication practice. Eccles et al. (2014) found that high-sustainability firms had distinctive processes related to stakeholder engagement, board oversight, and measurement. The present study adds qualitative evidence showing how managers interpret the integration of sustainability indicators as a turning point in governance transformation. When environmental and social indicators enter dashboards, investment appraisals, supplier evaluation, and executive review meetings, sustainability becomes part of managerial accountability. This also resonates with Hart's (1995) natural-resource-based view, which suggests that environmental capabilities can become sources of strategic advantage when integrated into core organizational capabilities. Therefore, sustainability metrics should not be seen merely as reporting tools; they are governance technologies that shape managerial attention, priorities, and behavior.

The fourth category, stakeholder-oriented accountability, indicates that sustainability-oriented enterprises expand governance beyond internal reporting and hierarchical control. Participants described a shift from upward accountability to shareholders and senior executives toward broader accountability to employees, customers, communities, regulators, suppliers, and society. This result is consistent with Freeman's (1984) stakeholder approach and with Aguinis and Glavas' (2012) multilevel review of corporate social responsibility, which showed that CSR involves institutional, organizational, and individual-level dynamics. It also aligns with Scherer and Palazzo's (2011) political CSR perspective, which argues that firms increasingly participate in broader governance roles where social and environmental problems cannot be solved by governments alone. The present findings suggest that stakeholder engagement is not only a legitimacy practice but also a learning mechanism. Participants reported that stakeholder dialogue exposed blind spots, revealed operational risks, and encouraged more responsible decision-making. Thus, sustainability-oriented accountability requires mechanisms for listening, transparency, deliberation, and response rather than one-way reporting.

The fifth category, learning-based transition capabilities, shows that the evolution toward sustainability-oriented enterprises is gradual, iterative, and capability-dependent. Participants described sustainability transformation as a process of experimentation, resistance, adjustment, and cultural learning. This finding aligns with Bansal's (2005) longitudinal view of corporate sustainable development, which emphasizes the interaction of organizational capabilities, institutional conditions, and strategic adaptation. It also supports the broader dynamic capability perspective, according to which organizations must sense environmental changes, seize strategic opportunities, and reconfigure internal resources to remain viable under changing conditions. In the context of sustainability, learning capabilities enable organizations to reinterpret profitability, redesign routines, develop sustainability knowledge, and manage trade-offs among economic, social, and environmental objectives.

The findings also show that cultural change is essential: sustainability becomes embedded when employees and managers begin to see it not as a constraint on performance but as a long-term value logic.

Overall, the study suggests that sustainability-oriented enterprises emerge through the alignment of governance systems and leadership systems. Governance provides formal accountability through board oversight, measurement systems, policies, incentives, and stakeholder mechanisms. Leadership provides interpretive and relational capacity through purpose articulation, cultural influence, distributed responsibility, ethical judgment, and learning. When governance and leadership are disconnected, sustainability remains fragile. Governance without leadership may become bureaucratic compliance, while leadership without governance may become symbolic rhetoric. The contribution of this study is therefore the development of a processual understanding of sustainability-oriented enterprise evolution: organizations move from compliance to purpose, from individual leadership to distributed leadership, from isolated metrics to integrated decision systems, from internal control to stakeholder accountability, and from programmatic implementation to adaptive learning.

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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