

Stakeholder exclusion practices of responsible leaders: an investigation into the application of responsible leader values in stakeholder inclusion and exclusion

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Stakeholder exclusion practices of Responsible Leaders:

An investigation into the application of responsible leader values in stakeholder inclusion and exclusion

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to explore the stakeholder exclusion practices of responsible leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – An interpretive multiple case analysis of seven responsibly led organisations was employed. Twenty two qualitative interviews were undertaken to investigate and understand perceptions and practice of responsible leaders and their approach to stakeholder inclusion and exclusion.

Findings - The findings revealed new and surprising insights where responsible leaders compromised their espoused values of inclusivity through the application of a personal bias, resulting in the exclusion of certain stakeholders. This exclusivity practice focused on the informal evaluation of potential stakeholders' values and where they did not align with those of the responsible leader these stakeholders were excluded from participation with the organisation. This resulted in the creation and continuity of a culture of shared moral purpose across the organisation.

Originality – This paper presents original empirical data challenging current perceptions of responsible leader inclusivity practices and indicates areas of leadership development that may need to be addressed.

Research limitations/implications – This study focussed on responsible leader led organisations, so the next stage of the research will include mainstream organisations (i.e. without explicit responsible leadership) to examine how personal values bias affects stakeholder selection in a wider setting.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that reflexive practice and critically appraising management methods in normative leadership approaches may lead to improvements in diversity management.

Keywords: Responsible leadership, stakeholder inclusion, stakeholder exclusion, diversity management.

Paper type Original

Introduction

‘Responsible leadership is inclusive and far-reaching’ (Stone-Johnson 2014, p. 660) where responsible leaders are concerned for the wider stakeholder community (Voegtlin et al. 2020) and apply moral values in their decision making (Cameron 2011, Ciulla 2014). This form of leadership responds to the growing demand within society for ethical business practice (Pless & Maak 2011) where there is a need for inclusive capitalism (Waldman, Siegel & Stahl 2020)

The inclusivity challenge of satisfying multiple stakeholder needs, governing from a moral standpoint whilst also maintaining a viable organisation requires responsible leaders to ‘possess the cognitive ability’ to achieve positive outcomes within this context (Voegtlin et al. 2020, p. 414), making responsible leadership (RL) an aspirational, but potentially unobtainable goal (Cameron 2011). Maak (2007, p.330) highlights a key challenge for responsible leaders is the need for proactivity where they are ‘required to enable inclusive stakeholder engagement’ and that although this is a complex task with many uncertainties, this will lead to building social capital and the common good.

However, although the RL literature sees responsible leaders as inclusive leaders, it does not explore in significant detail how this is practiced or where the limit of inclusivity is (Waldman, Siegel & Stahl 2020, Voegtlin et al. 2020). This limited understanding presents challenges, for instance, where inclusivity may be espoused by a responsible leader it is not possible for them to be wholly inclusive to all stakeholders all of the time, particularly where stakeholder needs may be mutually exclusive, equally they cannot consult with all stakeholders on all issues. Indeed, dark leadership studies have highlighted how abusive and destructive leaders have an ‘utter disregard’ for stakeholders (Milosevic, Maric & Lončar

2020 p. 120) thus presenting RL as an antidote to this with its espoused stakeholder inclusivity approach, but it too must have limits. This article seeks to understand where the boundary of this inclusivity is and what rationale underpins this decision making?

Stakeholder inclusion among responsible leaders is a relatively nascent topic and this is reflected in the extant literature where the majority of studies are largely theoretical (Marques, Reis & Gomes 2018) with limited empirical studies of how organisations are actually engaging with RL (Voegtlin et al., 2020). To deepen our understanding of responsible leader practice around stakeholder inclusivity, this study investigated this activity across seven responsibly led organisations. The investigation focused on behaviours linked with stakeholder inclusion and management, and the espoused rationale for this practice. The findings revealed that responsible leaders use their personal moral values as a decisional heuristic within stakeholder selection, actively seeking those who share their moral values. In doing so, they also identify those whose values do not align with their own and actively seek to exclude these individuals. This results in the preservation of the organisational culture of shared moral purpose (Voegtlin 2011, Waldman & Balven 2014), established from their own personal value set (Schein 2010). This unexpected finding of stakeholder exclusivity brings new empirical insights to contemporary RL theory, where it takes forward the understanding of stakeholder inclusion practices of responsible leaders. Responsible leaders were found to be inclusive, but this was bounded where they proactively included likeminded others as stakeholders, and actively excluded those whose values they perceived as not being aligned with their own (and by association their organisation). Thus, the responsible leaders in this study were not inclusive, contrasting current views of responsible leaders (Waldman, Siegel & Stahl 2020, Bhatti, Irfan & Öztürk 2023). Instead, they compromised their espoused values of inclusivity so as to preserve the

established moral values of the organisational culture, prioritising homogeneity above diversity.

In the following section I review the theoretical framework and current interpretations of RL with a focus on responsible leader values and stakeholder inclusion. This is followed by a review of the research methods applied, the key findings and discussion section. The paper concludes with a discussion on the theory development along with implications for future research and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Within society there is a growing interest and demand for responsible leadership (RL) (Voegtlin et al. 2020, Waldman & Galvin 2008). The business scandals in the late 20th century (e.g. Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska, the Bhopal disaster for Union Carbide and the demise of Enron and Arthur Anderson) (Pless & Maak 2011) linked with questionable ethics and self-interested governance practices have brought into question many of the assumptions around the boundaries of a business's responsibility (Doh, Stumpf & Tymon 2011). Indeed, destructive leadership is a reality within many organisations where leaders violate the legitimate interests of the organisation by undermining the goals and employee's well-being in pursuit of their own interests (Mackey et al. 2021). These scandals and destructive leadership practices have fuelled a growing demand from stakeholders that businesses and their leaders take active roles in fostering responsible behaviour and ethical business practices (Maak 2007). Responsible leaders seek to address these needs through their inclusion of the wider stakeholder community (Voegtlin et al. 2020) and application of moral decision making (Cameron 2011, Ciulla 2014). This leads to the creation of responsible organisations with an aspiration toward the 'common good', recognising that

society's purpose is affording individuals with the help they need (where they cannot achieve this on their own) and where they in turn can contribute to the social whole. This ideological view may vary depending on the nature of the organisation and how it views society and can lead to conflict between individual interests, but not at the level of the organisation (Argandoña 1998). Pless and Maak (2009, p. 60) recognise this potential of responsible leaders' to be 'agents of world benefit', but suggest that to understand this in practice further research is needed.

Meliou et al.'s (2021) multi-case study of RL in the UK suggest that context has significant implications for RL and that where the responsible leader's shared concerns embed across stakeholders over time, this shapes what is responsible and possible. The research reveals four types of shared concerns: environmental/communal, professional, employment and commercial, from this they suggest that it is the relationality brought about by this that facilitates structures of meaning around RL.

However, the parameters surrounding RL are difficult to identify, even the term 'responsible' can be elusive, resulting in a lack of shared agreement on how RL is characterised (Rozuel & Ketola 2012, Miska, Hilbe & Mayer 2014). Antunes & Franco (2016) determined four dimensions associate with RL: aggregate of virtues; stakeholder involvement; model of leader's roles; and principles and ethical values. These dimensions detail responsible leaders as stakeholder integrators whose virtuousness and values inform their decision making and who's relational approach to leadership enables authentic engagement across stakeholders. Doh and Stumpf (2005) proposed that RL includes three critical components: values-based leadership, ethical decision-making, and quality stakeholder relationships. Maak and Pless (2006, p. 99) highlight two components of RL as

'social-relational and ethical' indicating that RL had moved away from the leader-follower paradigm to a leader-stakeholder model. Thus, RL becomes a relational approach where responsible leaders proactively engage others in the process of visioning and decision-making. However, Freeman and Auster (2011) pose the question, is RL simply a matter of decision making based on one's values or are there other compromises that are needed based on business, stakeholder and other competing needs? Maak and Pless (2011) contend that the level of 'response' of responsible leaders may well vary depending upon the context, stakeholders and circumstance. As a result, when asked 'what is RL?', the answer must be 'it depends'. Cameron (2011, p. 35) rationalises this as he sees RL as a normative leadership approach, where the aspiration is toward being the 'ultimate best' with the knowledge that this virtuous ideal may not be realised, but that this aspiration is an outcome in itself. This leads to a situation where responsible leaders must 'attempt' to balance the needs of all stakeholders without contradicting the virtues of being a responsible leader (Voegtlin 2011, Waldman & Balven 2014).

Although there are a range of values and practices that typify RL, common among them are two key elements; the application of personal moral values in decision making (Waldman & Galvin 2008, Pless & Maak 2009) and inclusivity of the wider stakeholder community (Maak & Pless 2006, Bhatti, Irfan & Öztürk 2023). Of course, these facets of RL are open to interpretation and may well be aspirational, indeed a recent study by Mousa and Arslan (2023) identified a willingness of leaders to pursue RL approaches but a lack of understanding from which to initiate this.

Responsible Leaders as Inclusive Stakeholder Managers

An organisation should create value beyond its shareholders to include stakeholders who might affect the organisation or be affected by it (e.g. employees, customers and suppliers) (Freeman et al. 2010). Organisations led by responsible leaders take this notion even further to include a wider range of stakeholders (e.g., environmentalists, employee family members and future generations) (Antunes & Franco 2016, Doh & Quigley 2014) building extensive networks that contribute value to enhance social capital through 'inclusive stakeholder engagement' (Maak 2007, p 330).

Pelled et al. (1999 p. 1014) defined organisation inclusion from an internal stakeholder perspective, "the degree to which an employee is accepted and treated as an insider by others in a work system." O'Hara et al. (1994 p. 200) described the concept as, "the degree of acceptance one has by other members of the work system". However, Humberd (2015) details a wider understanding of organisation inclusion where it is embedded within the organisation's culture (e.g., systems and processes, shared understanding, engaged leaders and training) and beyond the organisation itself to consider the external stakeholders that are affected by the organisation and in turn affect it. Where no organisation operates independently of its environment this is an important addition. To this end Brief et al. (2013 p. 839) assert that there is a need for research to explore, "what is happening outside organisations to better understand what is happening within them".

Responsible leader approaches are inclusive and can facilitate the development of psychological ties between employees and their employer, along with other immediate stakeholders (e.g. suppliers and customers) (Maak, Pless & Voegtlin 2016, Waldman & Siegel 2008, Mousa 2020). Bhatti et al. (2023 p. 67) identified responsible leaders as those who, "foster inclusion and enable the organisation to reap the social and business benefits of

diversity". Voegtlin et al. (2020) see responsible leaders as those who care for their followers and consider the consequences of their decisions for society, leading to win-win outcomes for the wider stakeholder community. A similar view is shared by Waldman et al. (2020 p. 11) where they see responsible leaders as those who "practice a more inclusive form of capitalism and broad-based value creation that considers the needs of a wide range of constituents, not just the shareholders". This recognition and inclusion of the wider stakeholder community by responsible leaders is echoed by a number of authors including, Garriga and Mele (2004), Jones, Felps and Bigley (2007), Orlitzky (2011) Miska, Hilbe and Mayer (2014) Antunes & Franco (2016) and Witt & Stahl (2016).

However, with some exceptions (e.g. Gond et al. (2012) who identify gender equity policies and integration of people with disabilities) what is not significantly explicated within the current RL research is how this inclusion might be expressed and where its limits might be. There is a clear indication of those (the wider stakeholder community) who are to be included but little or no detail on what this might mean in practice, other than to take them into consideration during decision making. Beyond this there are further complexities, for instance, where mutually exclusive needs arise within a responsible leader/stakeholder community there is a need to prioritise, which when coupled with the demands of the organisation and the requirement to hold true to one's morals can present as a paradox as these competing needs cannot all be met simultaneously. Rego, et al. (2021 p, 227) suggest that this paradoxicality can be resolved by experienced responsible leaders through the application of their 'practical wisdom' (a learned ability to apply one's knowledge, values and experiences to determine the most appropriate approach) and a 'paradox mindset' (where one accepts and is focused on resolving tensions). However, even where this might lead to an optimum outcome, it will not be to all stakeholder's satisfaction and there are still

other issues to consider. For instance, if all stakeholders are to be considered this will inevitably lead to slower decision making, which in itself becomes another point of concern, indeed when does one halt stakeholder consultation (Freeman & McVea 2005)?

A further complexity is the principle of reciprocity, which is vital to social stability and permeates all aspects of life, as might expressed by responsible leaders through their stakeholder inclusivity approach. However, where there might be lack of parity in exchanges this holds the potential to undermine the relationship, as reciprocity is built upon the 'mutually contingent exchange of gratifications'. Where this is perceived to be lacking, individuals (including responsible leaders) may see this as unfair and disconnect from the relationship, it being contrary to their values (Gouldner 1960, p. 168). Where this situation might occur it could present as a further paradox, where a wholly inclusive responsible leader must include those that do not value inclusivity, and thus have the potential to undermine the very notion of inclusivity within the organisation.

The RL literature also fails to acknowledge the variety of concerns stakeholders may hold and how responsible leaders attend to them. These concerns may be expressed in a variety of ways and vary from issue to issue, creating a dynamic stakeholder environment and resulting in some stakeholders receiving priority over others (e.g., those good at coalition building) (Mitchell, Agle & Wood 1997). Jones (1995 p. 432) argues for stakeholder prioritisation of those that are, "trusting, trustworthy and cooperative, not opportunistic" as this will result in a competitive advantage for the organisation, challenging neo-classical views of competitive markets.

As detailed above, there is a broad agreement that a key facet of RL is the inclusion of the wider stakeholder community, but at the same time there is a recognition that this area is

dynamic and complex, presenting numerous challenges to the responsible leader's approach. With only limited empirical studies of RL (Marques, Reis & Gomes 2018) and to my knowledge none exploring the limits of stakeholder inclusion, there is a need to investigate responsible leadership behaviour related to stakeholder inclusion (and possible exclusion) to deepen our understanding of RL as a normative leadership approach (Voegtlin et al. 2020).

Responsible Leader Personal Values

Responsible leaders' personal moral values act as a guiding mechanism for the practice of RL and are thus implicated in the decision making around stakeholder inclusion (Freeman & Auster 2011, Cameron 2011, Ciulla 2014). However, there are inherent complexities within this, for instance; if personal moral values are used as a guide for decision-making then who is the arbiter for whose moral values are most moral or appropriate?

Schwartz (2007) details ten universal (cross-cultural) basic human values (e.g. hedonism, achievement, benevolence, and universalism). He places these on a bi-polar axis where two opposing values become mutually exclusive, such as 'self-direction' and 'conformity', where it is not possible to display both values simultaneously. Responsible leaders have been found to demonstrate the values of benevolence (enhancing the welfare of those one is in contact with) and universalism (understanding and protection of people's welfare) (Crilly, Schneider & Zollo 2008), values that are linked to inclusion and diversity.

Within the construct of RL, where responsible leader's stakeholders have mutually exclusive needs, this exemplifies the challenge of balancing stakeholder needs whilst simultaneously holding true to one's moral values. How can a responsible leader apply the values of benevolence and universalism to all stakeholders whilst simultaneously leading a viable

organisation (viability being underpinned by the mutually exclusive value of 'achievement') (Schwartz 2012)?

There is an inherent need for responsible leaders to have the capabilities to manage this complexity and seek to balance mutually exclusive needs (Maak, Pless & Voegtlin 2016, Schneider, Wickert & Marti 2017) where there must be trade-offs or prioritisation of one stakeholder over another that is likely mediated at some level by the responsible leader's values. Voegtlin et al. (2020, p. 427) recognise this cognitive challenge of being a responsible leader and suggests a need for detailed qualitative investigation into the "exchange process between leaders and stakeholders and how this eventually might shape leaders' and stakeholders' behaviour over time".

Therefore, the aim of this research is to substantiate empirically the inclusivity practices of responsible leaders by exploring this phenomenon from a deep qualitative perspective. As detailed above, although responsible leaders are identified as inclusive, it is not practicable for them to be wholly inclusive of all potential stakeholders all of the time. If there are mutually exclusive needs amongst stakeholders, or where paradoxicality might present, how is this managed? Where are the limits of stakeholder inclusion, who is included or excluded and what rationale underpins this decision making? Do responsible leaders apply 'practical wisdom' 'as suggested by Rego (2021) and if so how might this present in practice? Also, within the scope of these decisions (where responsible leaders are moral decision makers) who is the arbiter of the morals that inform stakeholder inclusion?

These facets are of key importance where they foreground the practice of responsible leadership in the selection and inclusion of stakeholders, building a deeper understanding of this and its wider implications will contribute to RL practice and theory.

Methods

A grounded theory research approach was selected to explore RL stakeholder inclusion (Goulding 2009, Strauss & Corbin 1998). Glaser (1992 p, 34), justifies this approach for “areas that need opening up as the richest focus for grounded theory or a field with sparse amount of literature, so contributions are clear and strong”. Moreover, grounded theory can facilitate the development of new insights into social phenomena (Voegtlin et al., 2020).

Sampling and Participant Selection

When selecting organisations for the study, proxy indicators were used to identify those whose practices illustrated the values, attitudes and behaviours associated with RL and were thus likely to have responsible leaders. Indicators included evidence of CSR activities (Waldman & Siegel 2008) and public reputation, where an analyst/researcher would readily link the leader with employing CSR values in their leadership practice (e.g. Anita Roddick and Bodyshop) (Pless et al., 2012). Also, independent and credible recognition for sustainable or responsible business practices e.g. UK Chamber of Commerce Sustainability Award (Chamber of Commerce 2015) was used. As was the ‘Cooperative Marque’, an appropriate indicator as the Marque is to help co-operatives identify themselves as part of a global co-operative movement (Alliance, 2019). Organisations that hold the UK Social Enterprise Mark were considered (Social Enterprise Mark, 2019) as were holders of one or more of the ISO 14000 certifications (aimed at minimising an organisations impact on the environment). I also used Elkington’s (1998) concept of the ‘triple bottom line’ which considers more than just profit.

Following selection, Initial discussions with the responsible leader were also used to check that RL behaviours were present and that the values and practices of the organisation were driven by the RL, for ethical rather than greenwashing purposes.

Seven organisations from the north of England and their stakeholders were included in the sample of twenty-two participants (See Table 1) this size was sufficient to achieve data saturation (Corbin & Strauss 2008, Creswell & Miller 2000). The sample was broken down further to include leaders, managers, suppliers and staff from the organisation. During the initial interview, the responsible leader was asked to identify stakeholders who were most able to comment on stakeholder management activities thus following a snowball sampling methods (Lincoln, Guba 1985) and a selection of these stakeholders were invited to be interviewed.

[PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Data collection

The interviews were conducted over a period of two years and lasted between 30 mins and 2 hours (overview of questions at Appendix 1). Interviews were informal, reflexive and recognised the role of the researcher during the research process (Cunliffe 2008). This research followed the ethical guidelines of researcher's institution and were approved before the data collection process. To encourage open and honest responses all participants were informed that their comments and their organisations would be anonymised. Interviews were semi structured to allow the participant to engage deeply with the notion of stakeholder inclusion and consider how it affected their lived experiences whilst simultaneously promoting interpretations driven from the data itself (Charmaz 2014).

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed, memos and notes (Glaser 2014) were taken. Where a theme emerged that was unanticipated in the later stages of the interview process, earlier participants were re-invited to discuss this theme (this occurred on three occasions).

Data analysis

In order to ensure qualitative rigour in the analysis and according to the principles of grounded theory, I followed Gioia et al's., (2013) method of 'new concept building'. This approach provides rigour through a three-stage systematic process; first the data was analysed to create informant centred codes and categories (with the use of Nvivo software), these were assembled as first order concepts driven by the data itself. As the study progressed these codes and categories were revisited and revised as new data was collected. The first order concepts were then analysed from a theoretical perspective to identify second order themes, where themes emerged that indicated categories not previously discussed with earlier participants, these participants were re-interviewed to ensure the relevant topics were discussed across all participants. When a workable set of themes was developed (and no new themes were emerging) these were further distilled to aggregate dimensions that enable me to describe and explain the observed phenomena. Within the process of this analysis, a data structure was created (Figure 1 - below) depicting how the raw data progressed to themes and dimensions, facilitating a theoretical 'big picture' view of the data. Throughout the analysis I moved back and forth between the data, codes, themes and dimensions and the relevant literature abductively (Tavory & Timmermans 2014) to deepen my own understanding and hoping to identify 'the unanticipated and the unexpected – that are of particular interest in the encounter' (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007). I continued this process until I achieve saturation 'where no

new categories or relevant themes are emerging' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 148). Finally, I presented the findings through a data based narrative as detailed in the findings and discussion section below.

Within the abductive process it became apparent that there were unanticipated findings, this was particularly so in the application of a bias by the responsible leaders in their attitude and exclusion of certain stakeholders. Interrogating the interview data and referring back to the literature it became apparent that the personal values of the responsible leaders were implicated in this practice and further investigations and analysis of this unanticipated finding was undertaken and incorporated into the literature review, findings and discussion.

Authentication and Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, respondent validation was utilised as I worked with the participants during the study to ensure the data interpretation was in line with their interviews (Lincoln & Guba 1986) which in turn demonstrates the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba 1986, Thomas 2006). On completion of the analysis and drafting of conclusions participants were once again invited to comment and agreed that the findings represented their lived experience.

Findings

Analysis of the findings determined three 'aggregate responsible leader dimensions', these were derived from the first order concepts and second order themes (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton 2013), as depicted in the data structure at Figure 1.

[PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The focus of this study was to deepen the understanding of responsible leadership as a leadership approach centred around stakeholder inclusivity, driven by personal moral values. The data collected clearly indicated that these two aspects of RL were interconnected, in that the responsible leader's inclusion (or exclusion) of stakeholders was mediated by their personal values.

When the responsible leaders and their stakeholders discussed their values and how they related to their organisation's values there was a strong congruence within each organisation studied. Essentially, the personal values of the responsible leader were those of the organisation and were shared by staff members and other stakeholders. Where further discussion elicited comments on the origins of these values (RL driver) and how they might influence stakeholder selection, it was apparent that there were two main processes of responsible leader stakeholder selection in play; proactive stakeholder selection and reactive stakeholder selection. Those proactive selectors had a very clear understanding of their values and the need for stakeholders to hold similar values and would work hard to ensure only like-minded others engaged with their organisation. The reactive selectors were more passive in their practice in that they would not seek to openly restrict access to their organisation, but where a stakeholder was found to hold values significantly at odds with their own then they would respond to this and move away from the stakeholder or restrict their access.

Pro-active stakeholder selectors

Of the seven organisations studied four were found to practice proactive stakeholder selection. This selection approach was informal and based on the organisation's value set established by the responsible leader. The practice within this group was significantly at

odds with the RL extant literature, where inclusivity is seen as a key RL attribute (Waldman, Siegel & Stahl 2020, Bhatti, Irfan & Öztürk 2023). Comments from responsible leader Bridget (Organisation one) clearly indicates her intention to sift stakeholders (staff and customers) for those who have values aligned with hers:

Bridget (Responsible Leader): So right from the admin to the apprentice that comes in I want them to understand the messages I want the hearer to hear. So that users (customer) can choose to join our organisation. If what we have to offer doesn't speak to that user then I don't want that person to join in. Staff need to understand this. Thus, I put barriers in the way of those that are not aligned with the values, however they can still get through, I can't simply stop them, we are in a regulated sector.

Bridget goes on to indicate her ownership of the organisation values and that she proactively seeks to sift for values aligned others in the organisation's marketing literature:

Bridget (Responsible Leader): So we have more than a static website and have things like YouTube to ensure they understand the 'Bridget Smith values' before they choose to jump in.

It is clear to see Bridget's explicit attempts to inform potential stakeholders of the organisations values that are intrinsically linked to her own. She does this to enable self-selection amongst potential stakeholders prior to them engaging with the organisation (e.g., web-based content) then ensures staff are aware of the need for aligned values in potential stakeholders, and where non-aligned potential stakeholders might still be engaging with the organisation she erects '*barriers*' to prevent further engagement, up to a point where regulation might prevent further restriction. Essentially applying all the tools at the

organisation's disposal to ensure an alignment between the organisation's (and Bridget's) values and its stakeholders (e.g. customer, staff, supplier) thus including those who are like minded and excluding those who are not.

The 'Bridget Smith values' were to enable young people to develop and grow through the medium of outdoor experiential learning and that for her this was very much a life mission, to improve the lives of young people. On interviewing selected stakeholders (staff and service provider), the alignment with Bridget's values is clear:

Martin (Associate): Well, the thing that attracted me to this organisation was that it was more than a business and was more than a transaction business and was there to create something more meaningful - so we make money but only to make the business functional.

Paula (Administrator): Supporting the children's development is why we are all here.

Mary (Manager): I know that the person who owns the organisation is not just interested in money but they are interested in the children and their experience.

This shared focus on the higher purpose aims of the organisation is readily apparent within the comments from the responsible leader and her stakeholders. Within the wider stakeholder interviews it was very apparent that Bridget's 'mission' to improve the lives of children was shared, certainly she had 'identified a common moral ground' amongst her staff and customers, (Pless & Maak 2004, p. 137). This focus on selecting for those with shared values and pro-actively excluding those without contradicts current thinking on RL where responsible leaders are seen as inclusive (Doh & Quigley 2014, Bhatti, Irfan & Öztürk 2023).

This practice of stakeholder sifting for like-minded others was also apparent at organisation four. Responsible leader Martha comments on her need for staff to 'love unconditionally' as necessary for employment at [organisation four]:

Martha (Responsible leader): If you don't want to love unconditionally or you can't do this, then you will find it very hard to work for us because of the people we work with and that is my number one rule. That is our number one value. Which comes back to the shared values aspect, as this approach won't work if they (staff) don't have the same values. But they see that very quickly because if you try and self-lead without those values, you will come up against something, not necessarily me, but something.

The 'unconditional love' Martha spoke of was regarding attitudes of staff toward the organisation's beneficiary group, excluded school children, who had been referred to [organisation four] as an alternative education provider. It is clear that those who do not hold the established organisation values are sifted for and where sifting may fail will later be identified and managed in some way. This expectation of employees to be able to demonstrate the organisations' number one value of unconditional love is unusual and perhaps unrealistic, however we can see from staff member Heidi's comments that the shared values bond is very strong:

Heidi (Manager): Well my personal values now are what [organisation four] is... So those values, although I agreed with them in the beginning, they have become what I value for work as well and I think for some of the other members of staff that has happened to them as well. Not that I want it to sound like a cult or anything, but it does become that.

Evident in Heidi's comments are that she held aligned values at the start of her employment and these have been reinforced for her and others, to the point that she likens it to a cult. Ouchi's (1980) work on 'clans' would go some way to explaining the efficiencies and processes this tightly knit cultural alignment can bring, where groups are created through a mechanism of socialisation that ensures a thorough alignment of individuals and the organisations goals.

This focus of a principal reference point (organisation aim/mission) is also apparent at organisation two, where responsible leader Lewis comments on his recruitment practices:

Lewis (Responsible leader): Yes. I don't think that if you didn't want the world to be a better place and a fairer place you would come and work at [organisation two] anyway. When we are interviewing people for jobs we ask them what do they think of the work we do and why do they think it's important. This is usually a good indication as to whether they get it.

Here we see the aspiration to improve the world as a key value used to identify like-minded others during recruitment. This requirement readily identifies those who share the organisational values and is being applied as a heuristic within staff recruitment interviews. This values assessment is also applied to potential customers of organisation two, where those with non-aligned values are identified and avoided:

Lewis (Responsible leader): And we will only work with some people, so we won't work with multinationals or chains, we only work with independent organisations, charities and local government and that applies to the print distribution as well. And say if someone put in an article that was right wing or if something was racist or inspiring hatred, we would not print it.

Lewis's aspiration for a fairer world is further exemplified in organisation two's pay structure:

Lewis: We have as an organisation decided to have a flat pay structure and pay everyone in the company the same hourly rate.

This approach is perhaps demonstrative of the value of universalism (Schwartz 2012), a value associated with RL (Crilly, Schneider & Zollo 2008) and was shared across the organisation where staff members indicated that the higher purpose values of the organisation were aligned with their own and was why they had chosen to work at [organisation two], as indicated by employee Jane:

Jane (Administrator): I think if my personal values weren't aligned then I wouldn't be able to do my job.

However, this value of universalism is openly compromised where potential stakeholders (applicant employees and customers) have been excluded as their value set is not seen as compatible with those of the responsible leader and organisations'.

These proactive processes and mechanisms to both identify and select for stakeholders with shared values and simultaneously de-select those without, resulted in a close-knit community of shared moral purpose aligned with the responsible leaders' values (Maak & Pless 2006). This practice of exclusion is at odds with responsible leaders' espoused values and the RL literature. Of note was the proactive responsible leader's explicit acknowledgement and description of this practice where there was no attempt to hide or re-frame this exclusivity. Where staff were asked about this there was a recognition and acceptance of the approach, however this was more of an accepted cultural norm so more

implicit among this group, where the boundaries of inclusion were less clear. But importantly, the exclusion of the non-aligned was wholly acceptable within the shared values community, at the expense of organisational diversity.

Re-active stakeholder selectors

The remaining three organisations also limited certain stakeholders from participation. However, this was only applied in response to situations that alerted the responsible leader to a values incongruence with a stakeholder. Thus, the responsible leader reacted to a potential disruption of the values culture of the organisation, seeking to ensure the status quo. Unlike the proactive responsible leaders this was less clearly expressed and more of implied attitude held by the reactive responsible leaders.

In the example below we can see the moral values of mutual respect and fairness are promoted by responsible leader Peter within organisation six. We can also see that [organisation six] has fallen foul of unscrupulous business practices, where staff members jobs were put at risk due to the unexpected removal of a long-term contract at very short notice:

Peter (Responsible leader): In terms of values, things like fairness, being respectful to each other. Those sort of things I have tried to engender in the management team and others. We used to subcontract some work from one company and after two years working with them, they dropped us with just two weeks notice. One of our people working for them had said they were going to leave as they felt the company was working unethically. The staff were very bitter about this. This would make me think harder about who we worked with in the future.

We can see from Peter's comments that this negative experience has sensitised him toward selecting for more scrupulous providers in the future to mitigate risks to the organisation.

We can see that Peter has achieved this with external provider Frank (Responsible leader of an IT Service Provider, identifying itself as a social enterprise):

Frank (IT Service Supplier to organisation six): The important element of the relationship of the two organisations is that we are always willing to work together, so if Peter came to us with a request and said he didn't have quite enough funds to pay for it. Then we would be willing to help out with that, on the basis that on another time he comes to us we might charge a little bit over the odds, or whatever.

Frank's comments indicate a relational approach between the two responsible leaders and their organisations, a key attribute of RL (Maak & Pless 2021). Further to this we can see that flexibilities exist within their interactions so as to accommodate each other's needs whilst maintaining viable businesses, perhaps demonstrating the application of the cognitive abilities required by responsible leaders (Voegtlin et al. 2020).

A further example of reactive stakeholder selection comes from food based cooperative organisation five, where responsible leader Richard comments on his underlying values for the organisation and how they influence his leadership:

Richard (Responsible leader): Transition is hardwired into [organisation five], we see ourselves as an economic element and a project of the transition movement. We identify with this, in that things are going to get worse before they get better. There needs to be responses to that because the state is a failing state and the market is a failing mechanism for resource exchange... Its fair to say my values influence how I run the organisation, [organisation five] is an embodiment of what I want to do with

my life. It is because I have committed a lifetime savings, my wife describes [organisation five] as my first child.

Richards comments indicate a higher moral purpose to the organisation and the alignment of these values within the organisation. This view is also evident within comments from other workers within organisation five:

David (Coop partner of organisation five): Everyone has bought into the vision of [organisation five] and the togetherness and what have you.

As the founder and responsible leader of a cooperative based organisation Richard has also restricted new partner members from accessing the cooperative where they had indicated a desire to include new services that were at odds with the organisation's values:

Richard (Responsible leader): We had approaches from people who had ideas that were ethically unsound and were turned away. One example was that early on someone wanted to set up a spread betting syndicate.

We can see the practice of stakeholder exclusion in response to an approach from a non values aligned potential stakeholder(s). The example given, gambling, is a business practice associated with exploitation and the lure of something for nothing. This would be wholly at odds with a worker cooperative where equality and community were key values.

All three reactive stakeholder selectors ensured the continuity of the values driven culture of their respective organisations. They had done this through identifying and preventing participation of stakeholders who they perceived to have values that were incompatible.

Unlike the proactive stakeholder selectors, they did not indicate any practice of seeking out like minded others. More they were alerted to situations where potential stakeholders held

values that were incompatible with the established value set of the organisation and addressed this issue through restricting access to the organisation or individual. Thus, they were preserving the shared moral purpose and culture of the organisation (perhaps unwittingly) by preventing further engagement with non-aligned individuals or organisations. This resulted in a shared value set across the organisation but was significantly less overt and dominant than was the case for the proactive stakeholder selectors.

All responsible leaders involved in this study applied their personal values in the inclusion and exclusion of stakeholders. This was particularly so around employee recruitment but also extended to customers and suppliers. This resulted in the development of a stakeholder group consisting of like-minded individuals and organisations with a shared moral purpose.

An overview of each of the responsible leaders, their approach to stakeholder selection, responsible leadership driver (what brought them to RL), personal values and stakeholder inclusion/exclusion is detailed in Table 2.

[PLACE TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

This study brings new empirical insights and further depth to responsible leadership. The first two of the three dimensions (Fig 1.) revealed in the data support existing RL literature, whilst also giving further empirical rigour and deeper insights here. Importantly, the third dimension (Resolving the Paradox) brings new insights, significantly extending and challenging current RL theories around stakeholder inclusion.

Dimension 1: Values Activation

Personal moral values were central to the RL practices of all seven responsible leaders (Freeman & Auster 2011, Cameron 2011, Ciulla 2014). This was particularly apparent for the proactive responsible leaders whose life mission was to respond to the needs of those they perceive in need. Whereas the reactive responsible leaders recognised their purpose as improving the lives of others and that this gave meaning to their occupation. Indeed, the reactive responsible leaders were noticeably less evangelical than the proactive responsible leaders. This ability to perceive the needs in others, see these as relevant and have the compulsion to act was a key facet of all the responsible leaders studied.

The first order concepts (Fig 1.) supports current RL literature, in particular the responsible leaders' defining of the organisation's moral purpose as the bedrock underpinning the culture of shared moral purpose that attracted likeminded others (second order theme) (Maak & Pless 2006, Waldman, Siegel & Stahl 2020). The responsible leaders in this study took on a citizen role, where they and their stakeholders saw them as responding to moral obligations and demonstrating aspirations for long term solutions faced by society.

Stakeholders recognised the responsible leaders' personal moral values as normative and saw them as a leader who held beliefs and inclinations linked to societies challenges (Waldman, Siegel & Stahl 2020). Where there was a presence of bias (discussed below) this would also be accepted by stakeholders, even where this might contradict the responsible leaders espoused values of inclusivity. The responsible leader's values and aspirations for the beneficiaries would inform the aims and values of the organisation they led and would underpin their leadership approach. As a result, stakeholders would associate the responsible leaders' passion and engagement with the cause of the organisation to a point where the responsible leadership of the organisation was a psychological underpinning that

could not easily be removed (Doh & Quigley 2014). The responsible leader and the organisation had become conjoined, built upon a normative set of personal moral values (second order theme).

Having the compulsion to address the change (Voegtlin et al. 2020) and demonstrating the associated values and capabilities (Pless, Maak & Waldman 2012) would alert and engage potential stakeholders, resulting in the values based activation (Dimension 1) across this group of like-minded others. This empirical insight re-enforces the significance of the responsible leaders' personal values as the bedrock of the shared moral purpose that would lead to the values activation of like-minded stakeholders.

Dimension 2: Values based culture crystallisation

Schein (2010) sees leadership as the management of culture and this was the case for the responsible leaders studied. The establishment and reinforcement of a culture of shared moral values was a result of the application of cultural artefacts (2nd order theme) and a social-relational approach to stakeholder engagement (2nd order theme). For the proactive responsible leaders, they went to significant lengths in sharing and promoting their values around the need to support the beneficiaries who had been failed by society. When these efforts become successful they create a normative aspect to successful leadership where 'all group learning must reflect someone's original beliefs and values - his or her sense of what ought to be' (Schein 2010 p. 19). Within this study that 'someone' was the responsible leader, whose personal moral values manifested in artefacts and engaging rhetoric that led to the crystallisation of the values based culture (Dimension 2). This advances RL theory by identifying the dimensions that characterise RL stakeholder engagement, giving specificity on how responsible leaders create a social-relational relationship with their stakeholders.

These dimensions explain the process of stakeholder engagement and the rationale for stakeholder commitment. In particular, this study showed how responsible leaders' values and beliefs were communicated in the form of information sharing (e.g., marketing literature, public speaking, staff induction) policy artefacts (e.g., equal pay structure) rituals (e.g., celebration of positive beneficiary outcomes) and psychological artefacts (e.g., beneficiary outcomes prioritised above monetary gain), engendering trust, commitment and ownership across stakeholders. Indeed, the values alignment and 'belonging' of staff was so significant that several employees commented that they did not feel they could work elsewhere due to their sense of belonging and 'fit' with their current employer whose values they shared. Their comments implied that they had found the ideal job where they had ownership over their work, valued it highly, knew they were positively contributing to society and enjoyed the cultural homogeneity of the organisation. Further comments from the wider stakeholder community re-enforced the relational aspect to the responsible leaders' approach where they recognised the responsible leader as a morally accountable person who was trying to do the right thing.

Dimension 3: Resolving the Paradox

The RL literature recognises responsible leaders as inclusive of the wider stakeholder community (Maak 2007, Antunes, Augusto & Franco 2016) and the responsible leaders in this study *espoused* a concern for the wider stakeholder. However, deeper investigation identified that the responsible leader challenge of balancing the wider stakeholder needs and being wholly inclusive was not realised. Controversially, stakeholders whose values were perceived as ill aligned with the established value set and culture, were blocked from participating with the organisation, whilst those who were aligned were supported and encouraged to engage.

The cognitive challenge of balancing multiple and potentially conflicting stakeholder needs is seen as a responsible leader skill set (Maak, Pless & Voegtlin 2016) and the adoption of a holistic focus is a mechanism from which to balance the legitimate concerns of these stakeholders (Voegtlin et al. 2020). Where this is the case, it places a complex and potentially paradoxical challenge on the responsible leader and if successful outcomes are to be achieved this needs to be met with the appropriate capability set (Schneider, Wickert & Marti 2017). Theoretically this has merit, a complex situation requires a complex response. However, the variance in the aims of the organisations, the potentially mutually exclusive needs of stakeholders, the need for organisation viability within a dynamic environment leaves responsible leaders with a near impossible task.

This study revealed that balancing the needs of the stakeholders and the RL organisation within a challenging environment, whilst staying true to one's values created a paradox. Where to be wholly inclusive, the responsible leader would need to include those they might judge as not prioritising moral purpose (and inclusion), and thus potentially erode the organisational culture of shared moral purpose. Rego, et al, (2021) suggest that this paradoxicality can be resolved through the application of 'practical wisdom' and a 'paradox mindset'. Indeed, the application of experience and certain skills sets may lead to the 'best' outcome in a given situation, but not necessarily to the satisfaction of all stakeholders, as was the case in this study where the responsible leaders sacrificed their espoused values of inclusivity for the security of exclusivity.

The reactive responsible leaders' exclusivity was pragmatic in that they would avoid stakeholders who might be unscrupulous and even block access to those discovered to hold values that might be considered as being opposed to the shared moral purpose of the

organisation. The proactive responsible leaders demonstrated far more rigour toward only engaging with like-minded others and thus maintained their organisational culture. For the proactive responsible leaders their open application of a values based personal bias in staff recruitment and stakeholder inclusion was explicit and wholly accepted by that community. Thus, both types of responsible leader were engaged in maintaining their established culture of shared moral purpose. The reactives in a pragmatic sense; ensuring the continuity of the organisations aims but also allowing for some diversity. The proactives in an idealistic sense; utilising all the tools at their disposal to ensure all stakeholders shared the moral purpose value set. The outcome of this approach ensured the continuity of the established culture of shared moral purpose.

Where there is a culture of shared moral purpose, if non values aligned others are admitted this will dilute that culture. As the dilution grows ultimately this cultural underpinning must cease to exist, opposing values cannot be simultaneously expressed (e.g., universalism and power) (Schwartz 2012). Therefore, there cannot be a culture of shared moral purpose and inclusion where significant enough members do not share these values. Where the scales might tip to another value set would be hard to know, however if there is no dilution and all stakeholders are selected for their values alignment, then the normative culture of shared moral purpose is assured. Thus, the responsible leaders in this study have maintained the established organisation culture through the application of a personal bias in stakeholder selection, compromising their espoused values of inclusivity, this is their resolution to the responsible leader stakeholder paradox (Dimension 3) and presents as new empirical findings in RL.

Theoretically this study advances our understanding of RL, particularly where it informs on responsible leader approaches to culture creation (Dimensions 1 & 2) and maintenance (Dimensions 2 & 3). The study showed that when faced with a mutually exclusive dilemma, responsible leaders will prioritise cultural maintenance above inclusivity, presenting as an incongruency between their espoused and lived values. However, if a purpose driven organisation is to be successful, it will fare better driven by those who value that purpose, highlighting the importance of a shared values culture. This implicates the responsible leaders as utilitarian strategic decision makers who prioritise the purpose of the organisation above inclusivity, justifying their moral compromise where they are choosing what they perceive as the greater good (prioritising organisation beneficiaries over non-values aligned stakeholders) when posed with a mutually exclusive decision. These empirical insights extend RL theory, explaining how stakeholder inclusion and exclusion is mediated (and perhaps justified) by the responsible leader's personal values and strategic focus, and the subsequent perceived need for a culture of shared moral purpose. Thus, although RL may be viewed as normative approach to leadership, it is much more nuanced and the pragmatic realities of ensuring the continued success of the organisation has the potential to erode the application of moral decision-making.

Conclusion

This study explored the stakeholder inclusion practices of responsible leaders. It revealed that responsible leaders compromised their espoused values of inclusivity to exclude potential stakeholders who presented with values that were perceived as incompatible with the moral values of the responsible leader and the organisation. This practice established and maintained an organisational culture of share moral values, strongly aligned with the purpose of the organisation. This challenges current RL theory where responsible leaders

are seen as inclusive of the wider stakeholder community and moral. However, from a utilitarian perspective there is justification, in that the responsible leader is seeking the 'greater good' when faced with a dilemma (or paradox) and perceives the maintenance of a culture of shared moral values as the priority, where it will lead to achieving the organisational purpose (justifying the exclusion of those who would dilute this).

Implications for Practice and Theory

The presence of a bias in stakeholder selection and inclusion has far reaching implications for responsible leaders and their organisation. Where RL is held up as a normative approach to leadership, the application of any bias should be examined carefully and reflected upon by the responsible leader and their followers (even where there may be a perceived utilitarian ethic implicated). Within this study the bias was born of the personal moral values of the responsible leaders, however with no arbiter in play who is to say that these values are moral and not just a personal crusade born of the responsible leader's life experience? Indeed, even with a justified organisational purpose the practice of exclusion is questionable, we live in a diverse, multi-cultural world and any 'cause' should recognise and respond to this and not be so narrowly focused as to only pursue its' own ends.

Followers also have a responsibility here, not to simply accept the vision and practice of responsible leaders (or other higher purpose forms of leadership) as normative and to be critical/questioning of these approaches from a broad moral perspective, the end does not always justify the means. With this in mind, formalising recruitment in responsible leader led organisations may lead to improvements in diversity management, as will greater awareness during staff selection and critically appraising management practices that exit non-aligned staff members.

Individually we can all reflect on the learning revealed by this study (both personally and professionally), within our communities are we selecting for like-minded others at the expense of those we perceive as different? The familiarity of similarity has the potential for the application of bias in all aspects of our lives and being mindful and reflexive of this can be an important step toward wider inclusion.

Educators and researchers should also maintain a critical view of RL (and other normative leadership approaches) and engage learners in exploring the 'dark side' of all forms of leadership. As suggested by Cameron (2011) RL is aspiration and laudable, but unrealistic in practice as many compromises will feature, exploring and understanding these limitations will give a deeper understanding of RL. There is also the potential for those researching and teaching responsible leadership to hold a 'left learning' view, necessitating both critical and reflexive practices and being mindful of one's own biases and the impact these may have on one's own communities (Waldman 2011).

Limitations and recommendations

There are limitations that should be considered when reviewing these findings. As a qualitative review the data is not generalisable to all responsible organisations. However, as a nascent area of study the qualitative approach adopted has enabled a deep level of investigation leading to new insights worthy of further investigation.

The stakeholder exclusivity practice presented here was an unanticipated finding, thus there is a need for further exploration of this phenomenon within RL and how responsible leaders might justify their exclusivity practices. Particularly, what is not made clear within the data presented is the reason given by the responsible leaders who had taken this approach, what was their underpinning rationale? Are they consciously prioritising organisational culture

above inclusivity or is this an outcome of personal values application yet to be revealed? If the genesis of this bias is identified this will pave the way for more informed decision making and create the potential for ameliorating the practice.

Appendix 1 – Interview Questions

Following an initial discussion on the various aspects of RL and the participant self-identifying as a responsible leader (or a follower/stakeholder identifying the leader as a responsible leader). The following questions were used to initiate discussions (the duration of the interviews ranged from 30min to 2 hours).

Questions to responsible leaders included:

- How did you come to be leading this organisation, where did it all start?
- Where you see yourself as a responsible leader, why have you chosen this approach?
- As the leader who do you see as your stakeholders?
- Who are your customers/end users/beneficiaries and why have you chosen to 'serve' them?

Questions to responsible leaders and other participants included:

- How would you describe the core values of the organisation?
- Which people or groups of people does your organisation have an impact upon?
- How do you determine who your stakeholders are and their expectations?'... 'which of these expectations do you seek to meet?' ... 'why and how do you meet them?
- Are there stakeholders you would choose not to work with? ... if so who and why?

Questions to other participants included:

- Why do you think they (responsible leader) have established this organisation?
- How did you come to be involved with the organisation?

- How would you describe their (responsible leader) approach to engaging with stakeholders?
- Does the leader/organisation treat its stakeholders equally?

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