Examining the nexus between human resource leadership and corporate sustainability: views of human resource professionals in Ghanaian SMEs

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Abstract: This paper examines the nexus between human resource leadership (HRL) and corporate sustainability (CS) in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ghana. Though HRL and CS are interrelated, the growing strategic concern is recognising senior human resource professionals as leaders capable of corporate change towards more sustainable organisations. This paper utilised exploratory qualitative research techniques by interviewing 15 senior human resource managers working in SMEs in Ghana. The data were analysed using the grounded theory method. The findings suggest that some of the HRL practices are being utilised more than the others, with some activities critical to CS design and implementation. Some of the CS practices supported by HR leaders are traditional and basic. Certain organisational factors were discovered as critical to the effective design and implementation of sustainability practices. Some practical, theoretical, and research implications for understanding and embedding sustainability within organisations were discussed.

Keywords: human resource leadership; corporate sustainability; SMEs; resource-based view; Ghana.

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1 Introduction

Conventional wisdom suggests that corporations and businesses are the reasons why societies are confronted by enormous social, economic and environmental challenges. Unconventional thinking also highlights that corporations and businesses can both be sources and solutions to the current societal challenges of climate change, migration, pandemics, disasters, economic downturns, bribery and corruption and human rights violations. These societal challenges have implications for social, economic and environmental prosperity of humankind. Despite the efforts made by businesses and corporations, these challenges keep on increasing and demanding fresh approaches.

Organisations are seeking leadership for corporate change and transformation that keep them on a path of continuous and uninterrupted progress and development. Though corporate leaders and managers are currently approaching and supporting global activities and practices aimed at addressing social, economic and environmental challenges, current thinking suggests that corporate transformation towards addressing these challenges require effective leadership (Carter and Greer, 2013; Waldman et al., 2020). Nonetheless, Zhao et al. (2020) emphasised that leadership at all levels of organisational hierarchies can have an indirect effect on organisational outcomes through HR development and management practices. Stahl et al. (2020) also posited that one of the most effective

practices that can address societal problems is leadership of the HR departments. We argue that leadership of the HR systems and structures of corporations and businesses can help address CS challenges by acquiring, developing, and mobilising the needed human capabilities and potentials.

CS explains the ability of corporations to meet the needs of their direct and indirect stakeholders without compromising the ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002). CS is built around the idea that corporations have the capacity and resources to provide development by protecting the natural environment and wellbeing of stakeholders in societies (Hahn et al., 2015). The importance of CS can be seen in the way companies are currently identifying and managing economic, environmental and social issues in an integrated way through internal systems and structures (Azapagic, 2003). Bansal (2005) explained that CS drives corporations, whether small, medium or large, to meet three basic principles of economic integrity, social equity and environmental integrity. Gunarathne and Lee (2019) further demonstrated that CS has the potential to drive corporations towards economic benefits while saving costs associated with business operations. Stahl et al. (2020) were of the view that the need to integrate CS within organisations has resulted in restructuring the internal structures and systems, especially the HR systems to accommodate the demands and pressures on HR leaders to make decisions that contributes to sustainable society. Hence, we further argue that CS is implausible without the HRL and HR systems can act as partners and implementers of CS initiatives within organisations.

HRL expresses the idea that within every HR department there are leaders who are in charge of strategic thinking, corporate transformation, and long-term planning whose actions produce organisational outcomes (Harmon et al., 2010). Despite the current debate and ambiguity surrounding HRL (Harmon et al., 2010; Holbeche, 2011), senior HR managers are considered leaders within the HR infrastructures. For example, Holbeche (2011) explained that HRL situates itself between the fields of organisational leadership and HR management, as top HR managers are leaders who make strategic decisions and perform tasks that have the ability to influence organisation's long-term goals and produce the desired outcomes. This perspective is necessary because senior HR managers are expected to inspire, motivate, and influence employees towards corporate transformation and goal achievement. After all, managers can be leaders and leaders can also be managers. Though nascent, HRL is considerably useful for understanding how top managers within the HR departments develop the needed resources – competencies, knowledge, skills and behaviours required to transform organisations (Weiss, 2012). Evidence further support the view that HRL is critical to CS because it supports the creation of value which further contribute to economic, social and environmental prosperity (Harmon et al., 2010). Thus, investigating HRL can provide an in-depth understanding of the necessary adjustments HR leaders are currently making through their practices and activities to foster CS in organisations.

The SMEs in Ghana are considered an economic engine because their growth invariably creates more jobs (Agyapong et al., 2018). Despite their socioeconomic benefits, these enterprises can be considered as 'environment polluters' because they are responsible for a significant share of industrial pollution and environmentally-unsustainable business practices (Painter-Morland and Dobie, 2010). As a result, these businesses represent a major concern for ethics and sustainability in Sub-Saharan Africa (Painter-Morland and Dobie, 2009). Despite their contributions to the socioeconomic development and subsequently environmental issues within the country,

how their HR systems and structures are modifying corporate behaviours, core values, and employee attitudes towards sustainable business practices is yet to be understood. More essential is the observation that large enterprises are often the focus of CS research and less attention is paid to the latter (Amoah and Eweje, 2021). Within the current literature, so much has been written about HRM and CS (e.g., Stahl et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2012), however, our understanding and knowledge of the nexus between HRL and CS is relatively under-construction. Most HR leaders and scholars also acknowledge that the HR structure has been shunted aside when strategic issues are to be identified and addressed, and little change has been observed in the last two decades in this peripheral status (Holbeche, 2011). Though most senior HR managers are passive observers in the fight against environmental issues, they do better by taking a leadership position in managing CS issues (Harris and Tregidga, 2012). This demonstrates the urgent need to examine and understand how HRL influence CS by gleaning the views of senior HR professionals in SMEs in Ghana.

2   Theoretical background

2.1   *Resource-based view*

This paper is underpinned by resource-based view (RBV) as a theoretical lens. The RBV was largely developed by Barney (1991). The RBV highlights that firms can develop and utilise internal resources in gaining and sustaining competeness (Barney, 2001). Preferably, RBV support our argument that HRL constitutes a tangible and intangible sources of resources to foster CS. The RBV further emphasises that competitive advantage is possible if firms have a mix of valuable, rare, non-substitutable and costly to imitate resources. However, these resources should be a mix of tangible and intangible. The RBV argued that firms can achieve competitiveness by leveraging two categories of internal resources, namely physical and human capital. Firms' physical capital consists of tangible assets such as facilities, equipment, land, natural resources, and raw materials, while the human capital connotes the readily available competencies, skills, knowledge and abilities embedded in organisational and HR structures. Pedrini (2007) also maintained that human capital, which is an essential part of organisational resources, when effectively organised can support sustainability and corporate responsibility activities. Wright et al. (2001) opined that HRs and activities are sources of tangible and intangible resources which are needed to support the formulation and implementation of corporate strategies. Thus, we argue that HR leaders and the activities they manage can be considered as sources of intangible and tangible resources and capabilities that when properly harnessed can support the achievement of sustained competitive advantage and CS (Holbeche, 2011; Harmon et al., 2010). Moreover, research exploring the nexus between HRM and sustainability in SMEs has also shown that HR structures and systems are repositories of capabilities and competencies required to foster sustainability (Langwell and Heaton, 2016; Hirsig et al., 2014). Though RBV has seen several applications, it has received relatively less application in the study of CS (e.g., Darcy et al., 2014) and HRL (e.g., Harris and Tregidga, 2012), especially in developing country SMEs. Thus, we apply RBV as a theoretical lens to examine the nexus between CS and HRL in SMEs.

2.2   Corporate sustainability

Research has highlighted that corporate sustainability (CS) has three dimensions, namely economic, environmental and social (Baumgartner and Ebner, 2010). These dimensions explain the aim of CS, which are to address social, economic and environmental issues in corporations and businesses. The economic dimension of CS seeks financial sustainability by encouraging managers to guarantee at any time sufficient cash flow and liquidity while producing consistently to seek above average profits for their stakeholders (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002). The economic sustainability explains managers pursue of ethically strategic goals and management actions that ensure financial stability and economic growth and development. It further perceives CS as a source of success, innovation and profitability within companies (Baumgartner, 2014). However, managers can only develop economically sustainable companies through sound environmental practices (Gunarathne and Lee, 2019). The environmental dimension of CS seeks to explain the need for companies to protect and conserve natural resources for today and future generations (Baumgartner and Rauter, 2017). However, to develop environmentally sustainable companies, managers are expected to use natural resources that are consumed at a rate below the natural reproduction; reduce carbon emissions to the air, water and ground; and refrain from activities that degrades ecosystem and destroy biodiversity; and efficiently manage the environmental impacts of their products and services (Baumgartner and Ebner, 2010; Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002). The social dimension of CS explains that companies can develop stronger relationships with their internal and external stakeholders (Baumgartner and Ebner, 2010). However, to develop socially sustainable companies, organisations are expected to internally provide stronger corporate governance mechanisms, increase motivation and incentives, invest in health and safety management practices and develop the human capital of their employees. Externally, organisations are also expected to exhibit ethical behaviour and protect the fundamental human rights; avoid controversial activities that compromises companies' integrity; deal with bribery and corruption; while being corporate citizens (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002).

2.3   Human resource leadership

The concept of human resource leadership (HRL) explains the ability of top HR professionals and practitioners to influence the achievement of corporate and functional strategies by designing and implementing relevant HR practices and initiatives (Harmon et al., 2010). This conceptual understanding of HRL is necessary because top HR practitioners at every level of an organisation is expected to lead and influence how employees behave and perform towards achieving corporate goals (Holbeche, 2011). Though many scholars refer to the top HR professionals and practitioners as leaders, however, very little has been written about HRL because the very notion of HR professionals operating as leaders is still a relatively new insight (Holbeche, 2010). Despite its unique insight on leadership and management in organisations, relatively very little has been written about HRL (Holbeche, 2011) and its connection with CS (Harmon et al., 2010). Though nascent view, HRL perceives top HR managers as strategic leaders, capable of making long-term decisions that produce desired organisational outcomes (Weiss, 2012).

According to O'Neil (2008), HR leaders are capable of working in teams to solve problems and apply leadership practices to real world challenges, thereby creating a climate that encourages and sustains change by grounding solutions in management systems, which help to address sustainability issues. Holbeche (2011) also explained that HR leaders are line managers who are good at developing organisational and employee capabilities to deliver business strategies, and support sustainable performance. Ulrich (2014) further contended that HR professionals are capable of designing the right organisation by providing strategic insights on talent, culture and leadership. Wells (2013) also noted that the notion of HRL connects HR practitioners and professionals to sustainability mindsets, which enable HR leaders to support CS in organisations.

The HR leaders can support CS by using diverse practices and activities. Osland et al. (2006) found that HR leaders can perform four foundational and secondary practices. The four foundational practices of HR leaders include: focused strategy formulation, strategy execution, high performance culture, and fast and flat organisation design. The four secondary practices of HR leaders also include: securing talent, promoting committed leadership, encouraging industry-transforming innovation, and increasing growth through mergers and partnerships. These HRL practices were found to be useful in producing extraordinary returns to shareholders and stakeholders. They further showed that HR leaders can also carry out generic functions such as providing direction; leading with courage; influencing others; fostering teamwork; motivating others; developing others; championing change; and learning continuously. In his study, Ziskin (2016) also revealed that the best HRL practices focus on employees by making them better and more effective; helping them seek the truth, obtain real feedback and deal with change; enabling them to develop their talents and be their best; and giving them the confidence, courage, and capabilities they need to make important things happen and deliver results. We further argue that since these HRL practices are geared towards making companies sustainable, they can be used by HR leaders to support CS.

3 Method

3.1 Research context

The SMEs in Ghana was a preferred context because they are considered by policymakers and practitioners as the socioeconomic engine of the country. In that, these enterprises despite their sizes employ many people and contribute significantly to socioeconomic development (Agyapong et al., 2018). Despite their socioeconomic contribution, these businesses are also considered as environmentally unfriendly enterprises in Ghana and Africa (Amoah and Eweje, 2021). The SMEs everywhere in the world face resource challenges, which might explain why they are not able to address social, economic and environmental issues confronting them and their countries. Despite their resource constraints, SMEs are now looking internally to develop and leverage resources to achieve corporate strategies including sustainability (Langwell and Heaton, 2016). Available evidence also suggests that the HR infrastructures and top HR professionals within SMEs are valuable resources and capabilities for fostering CS (Stahl et al., 2020). These rationales provided an impetus to examine the role of HR leaders in fostering CS in SMEs using the RBV as a lens.

3.2   Sampling procedure

This study adopted a purposive sampling technique, which enabled the researchers to deliberatively select those participants who can provide rich stories, views and experiences (Patton, 2007). For the purposes of sampling, an HR leader was defined as a senior HR manager whose role is to make long-term decisions that produce desired corporate and functional outcomes. Participants, herein, senior HR managers were sourced from multiple SMEs covering a range of firms–savings and loans, information technology, automobile and equipment, hotels, oil and gas distribution centres, manufacturing, and waste management. Invitation letters were purposely sent to the HR Heads of the selected companies that had HR departments and those who agreed to participate were counted as consented participants. In total, 15 top HR managers agreed to participates in the study. These senior HR managers consisted of nine females and six males. Additional participants' information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1   Demographic details of the participants

Demography	Frequency (n)	(%)
Gender		
Female	9	57
Male	6	43
Job position		
HR managers	15	100
Years with company		
1 –3 years	4	27
4–6 years	5	33
7–9 years	6	40
Years of practice		
1–3 years	2	14
4–6 years	2	14
7–9 years	6	40
10 years and above	5	32
Sector of participants		
Savings and loans	2	13.3
Information technology	1	6.9
Automobile/equipment	2	13.3
Hotels	2	13.3
Oil and gas distribution	4	26.6
Manufacturing	2	13.3
Waste management	2	13.3

3.3   Data gathering procedure

The data were gathered using in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews were conducted using face-to-face and telephone techniques. A few telephone interviews were conducted for HR leaders who had busy schedules and due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Novick (2008) argued that telephone interviews are equally effective, especially when participants cannot be accessed easily or they are physically unavailable to be interviewed. During the interviews, participants were asked questions organised around the research question. Sample interview questions include: how long have you been with this company? As an HR leader, what do you think are your functions? In what ways do you support the achievement of CS goals of your company? What are the recent CS initiatives of your company that your department currently support? Which resources are critical for CS in your department and company? The initial five interviews were carried out by the researchers using telephone conversation technique due to COVID-19 pandemic, while the later 10 were conducted by one of the researchers using the face-to-face technique, by observing the social distancing requirement and wearing nose masks. The decision for only one researcher to conduct the latter interviews was made after the responses during the first five interviews were found to be strikingly consistent. That is, while each participant discussed their own individual position, the general underlying themes and insights were consistent. Subsequent interviews, therefore, provided confirmation by uncovering similar responses and allowed us to gain further insights. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45–60 minutes. The interviews lasted for 16 weeks. The interviews were transcribed for analysis.

3.4   Data analysis procedure

The interview transcripts were submitted to a deeper analysis using the grounded theory method, which included three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). The first author analysed the data, and the research team verified and confirmed the coding through discussion and consensus. The analysis was performed using NVivo 11 software package. During the open analysis, the first author created an extensive list of codes that were subsumed in various themes. This was followed by axial coding, where these themes were put into proper context. Following the coding technique of Strauss and Corbin (1998), we then focused on three factors: Conditions – how the actions and interactions of the HR leaders influence CS; actions and interactions – practices that HR leaders engage in because of CS; and consequences from these actions – CS practices. Thus, the relation between the themes were discovered and developed. During selective coding, the theoretical approach was refined by use of the theoretical memos developed during coding, figures visualising relationships between concepts, and field notes produced throughout the process of analysis. With this context in mind, the researchers agreed upon the following major themes: HRL *practices; SMEs' CS practices*; and *moderators of* HRL-CS *link*, which helped understand the role of HR leaders in fostering CS in SMEs.

4   Findings and discussion

Our findings are presented in order of the three thematic areas identified during the analysis and consistent with the views on the role of HR leaders in fostering CS within SMEs. We attempt to let the participants speak for themselves by providing a large number of quotes. However, due to space restrictions not all quotes related to the topic and points have been included. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, individual quotes from participants have been provided but without their identities.

4.1   HRL practices

Participants had no hesitation, nor difficulty, articulating their views on some of the practices of HR leaders that influenced CS. Several HRL practices were mentioned by the participants. They considered recruitment and selection as one of the essential HRL practices that support the promotion of CS. Some of them revealed that CS implementation requires sound staffing policies that attract and select the best calibre of employees with sustainability mindsets.

> "The HR practices that looks at sustainability, first of all, is getting the right calibre of people in, so the recruitment policies and procedure are geared towards getting the right calibre of people into the organisation (HRL 15)".

> "The companies use people strategy and that ensures that the right calibre of people are brought in, with sustainability mindsets (HRL 2)".

> "Whatever CS goals we have within the company, the HR needs to get the right staffing policies to attract and select the right employees to help in the implementation of the sustainability goals (HRL 3)".

The findings show that recruiting and selecting the right caliber of employees is significant in promoting and implementing CS in SMEs. Besides obtaining and developing the right sustainability mindsets (Wells, 2013), HR leaders can also attract and select the right employees who will commit to environmental issues (Jabbour et al., 2008). Through recruitment and selection, HR leaders can choose employees who have environmental value and knowledge in the operational processes, which might enhance the environmental performance of their firms (del Brio et al., 2007). Renwick et al. (2013) also explained that CS can be achieved when the HR departments use green criteria during recruitment and selection processes. Due to technological advancement, Mishra and Kumar (2019) encouraged organisations mentioned to develop innovative e-recruitment plans for attracting future workforce and enhance organisational performance, including environmental performance.

Some of the participants were of the view that performance management is critical tool used by HR leaders in fostering CS. They reported that performance management is a deliberate strategy employed to improve skills training, provide reward for sustainable behaviours, and subsequently achieve social, economic and environmental objectives.

> "Most of the time, after appraisals, skill gaps are identified and training are given to the employees, hence, performance management is a deliberate strategy we use to achieve sustainability goals (HRL 4)".

> "Performance objectives and KPIs are crafted in order to ensure that we are within our scope of operation and are able to achieve our social, economic and environmental goals as a business (HRL 9)".

> "We regard good performance and reward it within the companies to motivate
> and encourage employees to perform better (HRL 11).

Consistent with our findings, performance management is considered as one of the key HRL practices for promoting environmental behaviours towards CS (Gholami et al., 2016). This happen when managers establish a system of evaluating employee activities and performance consistent with sound environmental management principles (Jabbour et al., 2008). Using performance management system to foster CS requires managers to define key sustainability performance indicators and administer performance appraisal to measure and reward sustainability behaviours and attitudes (Chakraborti and Mishra, 2018).

Most of the participants added that training and developing people with the requisite long-term skills and knowledge is necessary for meeting CS goals. They shared the view that in order to meet CS goals, they have made people development critical aspects of corporate strategy and HR strategy. Some of them reasoned that people development supports CS implementation. In line with this finding, Rimanoczy and Pearson (2010) argued that environmental and social challenges that give rise to sustainability efforts can be addressed through HR development practices including training, education and learning that developed sustainability skills, knowledge and competencies.

> "People development is about building the right long-term skills for the right
> jobs or right roles and we have to match these skills with the overall corporate
> strategy, so that there is that conjunction and that will bring about sustainability
> (HRL 15)".

> "We cannot achieve sustainability goals without formulating the right policies
> aimed at developing our employees. Without developing our employees, we
> cannot implement a successful sustainability agenda (HRL 14)".

In lieu of the above findings, training and people development are widely considered as key sustainability interventions (Ziskin, 2016). This is because sustainability issues are seen as people intensive problem and require skill and knowledge development through employee training and development (del Brío et al., 2007). Thus, training and development programmes raise the level of eco-literacy and environmental expertise among employees (Roy and Therin, 2008), and further increase employees' awareness of the environmental impact of their own behaviours and organisational activities (Bansal and Roth, 2000).

Some of the participants were aware of their organisations' quest for succession and talent management. Participants revealed that sustaining their companies required them to strategically plan the HR. They also said that this required them to search, train and place talented employees at the right place at the right time to steer the affairs of the businesses when they retire and this was necessary to sustain the companies.

> "So for us as HR practitioners, we have to make sure we have the right people
> at the right positions at the right time for us to sustain the companies (HRL
> 12)".

> "We do succession planning and it has to do with talent management, where
> staff with unique talents are identified and prepared for future top positions
> (HRL 8)".

According to our findings, HR leaders can function as organisational designers and strategists for managing talents (Osland et al., 2006; Ulrich, 2014). Managing talents is essential strategic HR domain for unlocking sustainability because implementing CS is a

resource-intensive activity that requires new skills, knowledge and creativity (Gardas et al., 2019). Research has shown that defining, attracting, retaining and developing talents are critical because they contribute to sustainability and environmental management in SMEs (Chung and D'Annunzio-Green, 2018; Cantele and Zardini, 2018). These scholars demonstrated that talents matter in driving CS implementation in organisations.

Several participants believed that their organisations encourage them to develop and implement CS-driven employee engagement programmes. The main argument, according to the participants, is that achieving CS requires increased employee capacity developed through employee involvement, commitment and satisfaction.

> "We ensure that our employees are involved, committed, and satisfied with our decision making processes around sustainability practices (HRL 1)".

> "My candid opinion is that engaging staff is one of the important HR practices of the companies, particularly, in the implementation of policies and procedures to achieve sustainability goals within the company (HRL 15)"

Engaging employees has gradually become an important tool for supporting CS. The management challenge is that most companies and their managers are not able to engage their employees in sustainability issues (Haddock-Millar et al., 2016). For example, Casey and Sieber (2016) also maintained that employee engagement improves sustainability behaviours and attitudes because they improve sustainability thinking.

The participants also felt that managers and leaders of the companies should also be trained and developed. Therefore, most of the participants agreed that HR leaders have a duty to educate and inform top managers as well. Some of them reasoned that leaders and managers have a stronger influence on strategic decisions and goals about CS. They believed that the HR leaders, including other line managers need development to assume rather long-term perspectives on CS, instead of the business-as-usual short-term view.

> "My company's objectives are crafted mostly in our environmental economic, and social aspect of the business, which we are able to translate into goals and set targets for the organisation. Management trainings and development are the best way to get leaders and managers to learn how to implement and achieve these sustainability policies (HRL 3)".

> "One thing I will also want to add is that, sometimes, I think leaders should also be educated, yes we have our own opinion, but if we have policies in place those policies need to be followed, else, you will just do whatever you want to do, you might think in the short-term, you will achieve the results but it will come back to you in the long-term (HRL 12)".

The current findings have shown that training and developing line managers and leaders in SMEs can help improve CS practices. Management training and development educate line managers, and develop environmental leaders in the future (Renwick et al., 2013). Training and development is also necessary to help managers and leaders form appropriate managerial attitudes and sustainability behaviours (Marshall et al., 2005). Because sustainability in SMEs requires management attitudes and values (Williams and Schaefer, 2013). Besides driving financial performance (Suriyankietkaew and Avery, 2016), the right training and development improves management commitment towards environmental sustainability in SMEs (Cassells and Lewis, 2011).

4.2 SMEs' CS practices

Most of the participants added that their companies were concerned about promoting good sanitation and waste management. They revealed that their companies have invested in waste and sanitation management projects and are making the required efforts to make the country and the communities clean. However, where local partnerships are unavailable, their companies had to team-up with foreign firms to help address waste and sanitation management issues.

> "Our company has established its biggest waste management facility. Again, our company has partnered with a Hungarian engineering technology firm to invest in waste water treatment plant (HRL 11)".

> "Our company has been responsible for managing sanitation and wastes by providing sweeping, recycling, and cleaning services (HRL 12)".

Though earlier views on the contribution of SMEs towards environmental sustainability has been negative because they contribute significantly to the world's industrial waste and pollution (Hillary, 2000), our findings show efforts to support CS through sanitation and waste management. Baumgartner and Ebner (2010) have explained that sanitation and waste management are critical aspects of the environmental dimension of CS. Sanitation and waste management are necessary to protect and conserve natural resources for today and future generations (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002).

Majority of the participants also mentioned that they work hard to create jobs by employing the youths, who represent the highest number of unemployed persons in the country and the communities. They also indicated that youth employment improves standard of living and wellbeing, as well as socioeconomic development of the country.

> "The company has employed many of the youth. That is a way to assist the youth to improve their well-being (HRL 9)".

> "The various projects commissioned by the company have generated more direct and indirect jobs in the country (HRL 13)".

> "Through our broad spectrum of operations, the company has created jobs for the youths, thereby, helping to improve standards of living and accelerating socioeconomic development of the country (HRL 5)".

The SMEs as agents of economic growth and development in Ghana has been fully acknowledged in the extant literature (Abisuga-Oyekunle et al., 2020). Moreover, global employment generation by SMEs toward sustainable development has been observed (UNECA, 2005). Lawrence et al. (2006) found that SMEs attribute their existence to their ability to provide quality jobs and training opportunities. Thus, employment creation and generation by SMEs contribute to the economic sustainability, as part of their social efficiency (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002).

Most of the participants also believed that their companies pursue corporate sustenance through profit maximisation and total quality management. Some of them mentioned that part of their CS was working hard to continue to stay in business by making profits for the shareholders. However, profit maximisation on behalf of the shareholders seem to be traditional economic orientations with no recognisable sustainability focus. Some further explained that staying in business forever requires making the customer happy by providing them with quality products and services.

> "Our company supports sustainability by increasing profitability and maximising shareholder value. So, we ensure that our company becomes more sustainable for a longer period of time by increasing shareholder value (HRL 3)".

> "Our HR department plays a strategic role by influencing corporate sustenance and help provide quality services and products through our effective people management policies and practices (HRL 5)".

Nwokocha and Nwankwo (2019) mentioned that SMEs sustenance depends on reduced cost of production, risk reduction, resources accessibility and knowledge accessibility. We add to this list by revealing that corporate sustenance required SMEs to make profit and provide quality services and products. Thus, SMEs contribute to CS through corporate sustenance. Das et al. (2020) also reasoned that corporate sustenance measures have long-term benefits of fostering sustainability and achieving corporate strategies.

According to the participants, rather than making commitment to employees, customers, and shareholders, there is the need for an increased focus on external stakeholders through local community investment and development. They also added that some of the companies have sponsored a number of university graduates. Some of them revealed that their companies support needy persons in communities, and sponsor individuals, as well as national events.

> "Our company sponsored 10 university students from some selected communities (HRL 5)".

> "Our company has sponsored and represented the country Ghana at many regional and international Fora in order to foster the development of the country (HRL 10)".

> "Supporting communities is critical to our company and so through our annual thanksgiving service, we support communities and donate to orphanage to ensure we put smile on the faces of the needy (HRL 6)".

There has been an increased attention on SMEs giving towards local community development (Gao and Hafsi, 2015). Consistently, our findings reveal that SMEs giving and philanthropy are critical aspects of CS (Johnson and Schaltegger, 2016). Porter and Kramer (2002) also argued that these prosocial gestures and community involvements by companies explain corporate philanthropy. In their study Madden et al. (2006) further suggested that the underlying principle of corporate giving is to give voluntarily without expecting any direct financial benefits. Thus, it can be argued that corporate giving extends a social understanding of CS in SMEs.

4.3   *Moderators of HRL-CS link*

Participants shared their views on some of the factors that affect the way they support CS promotion and integration. Unsurprisingly, most of the participants said that resource availability is an enabler of sustainability and without resources they may not be able to support sustainability initiatives in their departments and companies. The analysis further reveal that HRs and financial resources are vital in pursuing sustainability goals in SMEs. The participants felt that having the right resources such as talents and money are some of the key moderators of the link between HRL-CS in SMEs. This finding extends the views of previous scholars who argued that resources are major constraints for SMEs to achieve sustainability (Darcy et al., 2014; Hörisch et al., 2015). Pedrini (2007) further

explained that human capital are intangible resources within organisations which provide the needed ideas, knowledge and intellect required to support corporate responsibility and sustainability efforts.

> "For our company, we pay attention to the kinds of talents we hire because they must be able to support our sustainability goals (HRL 2)"

> "Look, money is everything in business. But with the right calibre of people into the organisation, we can support the stakeholder expectation of being sustainability (HRL 1)".

> "Our company needs a lot of financial resources too to help in this direction. Yes, we can put in place all the structures with people, but they must be paid, so money matters as a business (HRL 15)".

Interestingly, most of the participants believed that without a strong culture, achieving CS might be impossible. Some of them further revealed that developing core values around social, economic and environmental objectives sustain companies.

> "We have carefully developed our core values to ensure that we are within our scope of operation and are able to achieve our social, economic and environmental goals as a business (HRL 8)".

> "The culture of our company is that we talk to our teams so they can understand what is happening in the company and bring them at par with management decisions, management policies, and even our corporate strategies, including sustainability (HRL 2)".

Our analysis show that SMEs attempt to live their core values in order to support CS. Corporate culture has a strong influence on the ability of HR leaders to support CS. Obviously, it is the duty of HR leaders to enforce core values and corporate culture. Corporate culture fosters CS as it ensures financial, social, and ecological well-being (Dyck et al., 2019). Core values are essential for CS because they ensure stronger economic understanding among employees towards CS (Linnenluecke et al., 2009). Fernández et al. (2003) also explained that corporate culture promotes environmental compliance within SMEs.

Most of the participants were of the view that practicing corporate accountability makes CS adoption, promotion, and integration possible. According to them, corporate accountability ensures that management are responsible and transparent to key stakeholders. They further added that being accountable also means reporting and publishing annual financial and non-financial statements.

> "We have a culture where management is accountable to shareholders and other stakeholders, as part of the company's sustainability practices (HRL 6)".

> "We have incorporated social responsibility, sustainability, and environmental performance measurements and reporting in our annual financial and non-financial statements for our stakeholders to assess for themselves (HRL 9)".

Though defining ownership and control is unclear in SMEs compared to large companies (del Baldo, 2012), our findings show that managers and employees were held accountable for CS performance. Valor (2005) conceptualised corporate accountability as corporate control where clear means for sanctioning corporate failures are established. He further explained that corporate accountability involves societies and shareholders. Our analysis suggests that most of the SMEs operated an agency-based approach to corporate

accountability and corporate social disclosure (Dunne and McBrayer, 2019). This agency-view of corporate accountability or disclosure reinforced HR leaders, who are managers themselves, to engage with CS.

Most of the participants said that strategic orientation influenced their ability to support CS. They also added that they are able to help their companies integrate business strategies with sustainability objectives and this required reaching out to other line managers and employees at the various functional level of management.

> "In my honest opinion, within our company, most of the functional areas have their own strategies used in running their operations through effective implementation and monitoring to make sure that sustainability goals are achieved (HRL 13)".

> "Our company's strategy recognises that corporate growth and profitability are important and pursues societal goals, specifically, those relating to sustainability, but you may need other managers and employees at the functional level (HRL 5)".

Our findings suggest that the HR leaders had to assume a strategic approach towards addressing CS issues. Consistent with the views of Bonn and Fisher (2011), managers in SMEs had to consider different aspects of CS during their strategic planning and decision-making processes. Strategic orientation is essential because it requires management commitment towards CS (Jansson et al., 2017). Therefore, expressing and addressing different dimensions of sustainability at the strategic level of SMEs help reduce their environmental burdens (Ardito and Dangelico, 2018).

Most of the participants felt that HR leaders can foster CS in their respective companies through strategic HR partnerships. Some of them added that developing strategic HR partnership is critical for mobilising internal support and resources for CS adoption and integration. They further revealed that strategic HR partnership is required from different internal structures to cooperate and collaborate for achieving CS.

> "Definitely, sustainability cannot be achieved without the involvement of the HR departments. In order to even implement whatever sustainability objectives that we are looking at, there is the need for HR departments to strategically partner with other departments and employees to help formulate and implement well-informed and holistic policies (HRL 2)".

> "In our company, the HR managers and officers serve as partners with other managers in determining what is needed for the attainment of sustainability goals (HRL 3)"

Our findings demonstrate that strategic partnership between HR leaders, employees and line managers is critical for CS. Strategic HR partnership helps HR professionals to partner with other line managers to achieve corporate goals through effective strategy formulation and strategy execution (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Dunphy et al. (2007) highlighted that strategic partnerships are essential because they can transform companies towards CS, because such partnerships ensure exchange of ideas and information. This is because building sound partnerships between managers, employees and other relevant stakeholders can promote efficient work practices by minimising resource use and waste within organisations (Kimmet, 2007).

Many participants talked about the need for learning as an organisation as critical for HR leaders to foster CS. Some of the participants noted that learning as an organisation encourages individuals and teams on one hand; and leaders and managers on another

hand; to acquire new experiences, information and knowledge about sustainability. They argued that HR leaders develop values that promote learning.

> "We promote the acquisition, creation, and sharing of experiences, information, and knowledge between and among employees and managers working in each of the company's subsidiaries, thereby encouraging individuals and groups within the company to learn and acquire new knowledge (HRL 5)".

> "Our company also ensure that employees are committed and engaged in the sustainability programmes that we design and we promote organisational learning by ensuring alignment between the organisation's core values and business activity, and our HR departments implement policies and programmes to encourage employees learning activities (HRL 4)".

Promoting learning among managers and employees is critical for bringing about change that helps SMEs adapt to societal expectations and solve problems with new ways of thinking (Scipioni et al., 2021). Consistent with our findings, Hundermark (2013) explained that organisational learning nurtures new patterns of thinking for dealing with sustainability issues. Bakos et al. (2020) also indicated that organisational learning activities improve SMEs environmental responsiveness. Organisational learning has been understood to help drive workplace innovation, where employees regularly take time to figure out ways to improve our organisation's work processes (Kibowski et al., 2019). Thus, SMEs are expected to employ organisational development and learning methods to support sustainability initiatives (Gray and Jones, 2016). In the end, SMEs can be sustainable if they learn to integrate economic, environmental and social sustainability principles in their business practices.

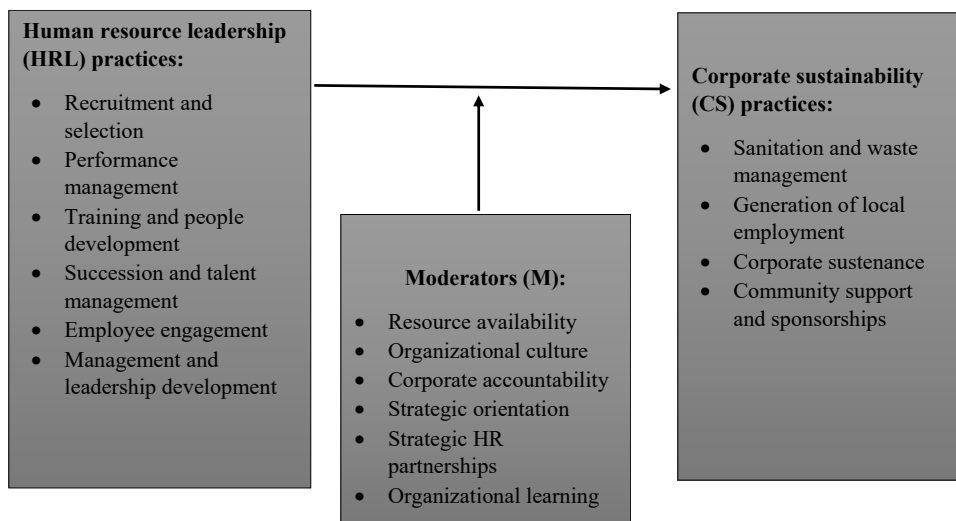## 5 Theoretical, practical, and research implications

The findings from this paper has theoretical, practical, and research implications. Theoretically, this paper contributes to the leadership literature by highlighting that HRL can be another unique leadership idea. The current leadership literature has emphasised on different leadership styles and typologies (Oshagbemi and Gill, 2004), but yet to incorporate HRL into the mainstream leadership debates. There is currently less emphasis on HRL in the leadership literature, which we sought to fill. Holbeche (2010) argued that the reason why HRL has received less attention in the leadership literature has to do with the notion of calling HR professionals as leaders. Another contribution of this study is that we add to the growing literature by highlighting the urgent need for integrating between leadership and HRM research because leadership and HRM may interact with each other when shaping various organisational and societal outcomes. The conceptual problem is that the development of the two fields to date has largely occurred in parallel (Vermeeren et al., 2014) and does not capture the full range of potential benefits and insights to be gained from analyses drawing on both fields. Another contribution of this study is that we have added to the growing research on HRL (e.g., Wells, 2013; Ziskin, 2016), and present relatively new insights on the potential roles HR leaders can play in organisations. A number of the HRL research has been built in isolation and largely highlight HRL activities and practices with less explicit contribution to the current societal issue like sustainability. In order to address this gap in the literature, we comprehensively reviewed available literature at the intersection of HRL and CS. In this way, we further add to the slowly growing literature on the link between HRL-CS (e.g.,

Harmon et al., 2010; Wirtenberg et al., 2007). Expanding and integrating the literature on HRL and CS is essential because the development of these two fields to date has largely occurred in parallel, not capturing the full range of potential benefits and insights to be gained from research on both fields, and consequently creating an urgent need to integrate research on HRL and CS. Additionally, we have contributed to the on-going debates on which HRL practices can support sustainability in organisations. A relatively few scholars have provided varying perspectives on this debate (e.g., Harmon et al., 2010; Wirtenberg et al., 2007). However, we found that not all HRL practices might strongly support CS and that HR leaders can foster CS by hiring new employees with sustainability mindsets; appraising employees' sustainability performance; impacting sustainability skills, knowledge, and behaviour on employees; grooming and planning the use of talented employees towards addressing sustainability challenges; making employees happy about their jobs; and developing potential and current managers and leaders who are pro-sustainability. Through the interviews, most of the HR managers believed that these HRL practices are instrumental in pursing CS. Moreover, another contribution is that we have extended the RBV to the study of the link between HRL and CS. Since the advent of the RBV, it has been applied to the study of several strategic management issues, however, its application to the study of the link between HRL and CS is limited and urgent. Barney (2001) highlighted that firms can gain and sustain competitive advantage by concentrating on their internal resources. This perspective lends support to our argument that if we are to make HRL research relevant and impactful, we must widen the lens to consider HR leaders as resources and capabilities as they possess useful knowledge, skills and behaviours and control and manage people with talents and dispositions which are vital to CS. Furthermore, our final contribution is development and addition to CS research in developing country SMEs and Ghana. In fact, research on CS are often limited, especially in African countries (Schaltegger et al., 2014). Even if they exist, most the research hardly considers the key determinants of CS. Thus, we have provided African SMEs perspectives on how CS can be achieved. We have shown that CS in SMEs in Ghana and other developing countries can be achieved through HRL. We highlight that the ability of HRL to support CS depends on some critical organisational-level moderators (see Figure 1) which represent some of the enablers of HRL-CS link in a developing country SMEs. Ayuso and Navarrete-Báez (2018) have argued that determinants of sustainability in developing country SMEs are context-specific. Though these moderators are empirically-loose patterns (Gioia et al., 2013) emerging from the analysis of the experiences and insights of HR leaders, herein HR managers, they demonstrate the current thinking of HR leaders in a developing country SMEs.

Practically, the findings from this paper are relevant for managerial practice. The HR leaders and SMEs could pay attention to the critical practices and activities that can strongly support CS towards the sustainable development goals. Most of the HRL practices are important but not all are vital in the fight against unsustainable corporate practices. Recruitment and selection, performance management, training and development, succession and talent management, employee engagement, and management and leadership development were found to have a strong influence on CS. Particularly, SMEs must invest in management and leadership development programmes that leads to the development of potential and current sustainable HR leaders. This is because CS demands new leadership competencies, behaviours and mindsets. In order to develop these new leadership competencies at various levels of management, SMEs and

their top executives could invest in HR development activities such as the action reflection learning methodology and project-based programmes, which have proven to be some of the effective ways of developing those competencies for CS (Rimanoczy and Pearson, 2010). This is because the development of the HRs addresses the issue of resource availability as an enabler of CS implementation. Closely-related to the above suggestion is the need for SMEs and their top executives, especially the HR managers to go beyond the traditional CS practices to embrace more critical and current CS issues such as climate change, human rights diversity, employee wellbeing, pandemic and crisis management, bribery and corruption and others that need urgent corporate interventions. This is because the current study found that the CS practices of the SMEs were traditional and basic.

Figure 1 Proposed model of the link between HRL and CS in SMES

Human resource leadership (HRL) practices:

- Recruitment and selection
- Performance management
- Training and people development
- Succession and talent management
- Employee engagement
- Management and leadership development

Moderators (M):

- Resource availability
- Organizational culture
- Corporate accountability
- Strategic orientation
- Strategic HR partnerships
- Organizational learning

Corporate sustainability (CS) practices:

- Sanitation and waste management
- Generation of local employment
- Corporate sustenance
- Community support and sponsorships

Future researchers might consider the following limitations and avenues for further studies. Since the sample size was 15 HR managers from the SMEs sector with many HR professionals, future researchers could increase the sample size to improve generalisability of the findings. However, a sample size between 10-15 participants has been argued to be acceptable in qualitative research (Robinson, 2014). Since participants were selected from companies operating in multiple SMEs sectors, the current findings might receive general application to the SMEs sector. Since, the findings were country, occupation and culture-specific, the findings are useful, with careful consideration. Extending this research into other developing countries in Africa and elsewhere might be laudable. The present study was cross-sectional, so causal relationships between the study variables were not determined. Future research could investigate the causal relationship between HRL, CS and the moderators; and possibly test the validity of the proposed conceptual framework.

6   Conclusions

HRL is seen as moving away from the traditional to more collaborative approach towards the formulation and implementation of CS. We have understood that HRL and CS are interrelated, with best HRL practices being the medium through which organisations can effectively address sustainability issues. We have also learned that the capacity of HR leaders, herein HR managers, to foster CS depends on resources availability, organisational culture, corporate accountability, strategic orientation, strategic HR partnerships and organisational learning. These moderators also serve as enablers of CS implementation in organisations. The capacity of the organisations to facilitate collaboration among individual functional leaders or managers who take on leadership responsibilities at various departments can help improve corporate efforts towards sustainability. Besides external partnerships, internal partnerships can help deliver sustainability goals in organisations. Through our study, we present a new insight on HR leaders as potential internal organisational partners for the delivery of sustainability goals. Therefore, we conclude that HRL can influence CS design and implementation within organisations.

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