

## **Responsible Leadership in the age of AI: A Systematic Review**

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### **Author Note**

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**Track:** Sustainable Responsible Business

**Specific Question:** “Can organisations maintain their competitive edge while prioritising stakeholder well-being and adopting sustainable business practices? How can this be achieved?” (Cao et al., 2025)

**Title:** *Responsible Leadership in the Age of AI: A Systematic Review*

**Summary:** “Responsible leadership is a concept that links leadership, corporate social responsibility, sustainability and ethics to business performance and actions of senior executives and board members.” (Pless, 2023). This developmental paper focuses on a Systematic Literature Review within the author’s PhD project. The researcher seeks to understand the current landscape of Responsible Leadership literature and how this intersects with research on the use of generative AI in organisations. This review will form the basis of the author’s mixed-method study using primary data to understand how AI use in organisations impacts responsible leadership behaviours. Feedback is invited from learned peers.

**Key Words:** *Responsible Leadership, AI, Sustainability, Ethics, Systematic Literature Review*

**Word Count:** 1746

## Introduction

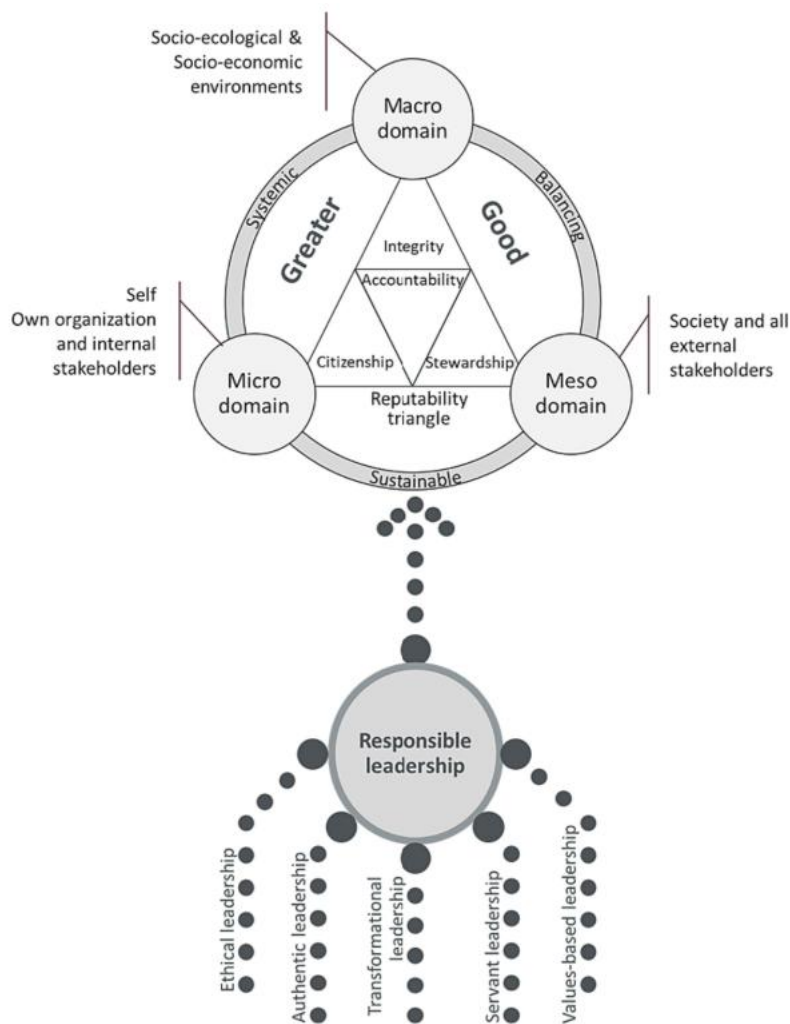
The purpose of this developmental paper is for the author to gain feedback on a proposed systematic literature review, which forms part of their PhD project: “Responsible Leadership in the age of AI: Balancing profit, sustainability and stakeholder needs”. They are a first year PhD student, with a predominantly practitioner background, who would welcome feedback from experienced and learned academic colleagues. Specifically, they would like to understand common pitfalls of the process so that they can design and conduct their review effectively. The systematic review will be used as a basis for a mixed-methods study with an exploratory sequential design (Harvard Catalyst, 2025). The intention is for the findings of the review to inform the design of semi-structured interview questions, which will be analysed using thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023) to contribute to the development of a Grounded Theory model (Gioia et al., 2013). This model will then be tested with quantitative methods in the next phase of the research.

This study will adopt a **pragmatist research philosophy**, which values both objective and subjective realities to understand complex phenomena like leadership. This will include **phenomenology** (the study of phenomena) for the qualitative research (semi-structured interviews), which is important as this philosophy focuses on the way people experience things (Smith, 2013). This is important in answering the research questions, as it allows participants to express views that may be lost in surveys. Likewise, the survey element of the research can be described as **positivist** (Nickerson, 2023), as the value is on objectivity and on quantifying the views of leaders on a larger scale, which reduces the limitations of the qualitative element of the research (subjectivity, bias, small sample). By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this approach enables a robust exploration of AI’s impact on responsible leadership. This is particularly important, as the researcher is choosing not to focus on a specific industry (instead seeking to include diverse industries and geographies) to improve the generalisability of the findings. However, feedback is welcomed.

## Conceptual Background

### Evolution of Responsible Leadership

The concept of responsible leadership was first introduced by Maak and Pless (2006), who proposed a relational model where leaders prioritise stakeholder relationships and sustainable development. They argued that leaders are ethical stewards responsible for balancing the interests of diverse stakeholders, including employees, communities, and the environment. Pless and Maak (2011) expanded on the concept by suggesting that responsible leaders should incorporate moral values, such as fairness, integrity, and care, into their decision-making. Voegtlin et al. (2019) later proposed a model with three roles for responsible leaders: expert, facilitator, and citizen. Suggesting that responsible leaders act as experts to ensure efficiency, as facilitators to encourage collaboration, and as citizens committed to societal welfare. More recently, de Clerk and Jooste (2023) have contributed to the conversation with a systematic review looking at responsible leadership’s place in the leadership domain. They found it to be comprised of elements from several different leadership styles (rather than being its own distinct style), but with the unique attributes of balancing (internal and external) stakeholder interests with the assurance of long-term sustainability.



**Figure 1: Emergent meaning of responsible leadership and its place in the leadership domain (De Clerk and Jooste, 2023).**

### **Differentiation from Other Leadership Styles**

Although responsible leadership shares characteristics with other leadership styles, it stands apart in its foundational emphasis on ethical stewardship, stakeholder engagement, and long-term sustainability. Where ethical leadership may focus primarily on moral behaviours, transformational leadership on inspiring vision, and servant leadership on service to others, responsible leadership integrates these elements into a holistic, systemic approach that balances business performance with social and environmental accountability.

| Leadership Style              | Core Focus                                         | Ethical Component   | Stakeholder Emphasis   |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Ethical Leadership            | Doing what is right                                | Central             | Indirect               |
| Transformational              | Inspiring followers towards vision                 | Supportive          | Individual development |
| Servant Leadership            | Serving needs of others first                      | Fundamental         | Strong                 |
| <b>Responsible Leadership</b> | Balancing stakeholder interests and sustainability | Explicit & integral | Central                |

**Figure 2: Differentiation of Responsible Leadership from other leadership styles.**

Despite the attention responsible leadership has gained as a concept, there is notably critique. Critics argue that responsible leadership can overstretch a leader's focus away from business performance, leading to reduced effectiveness (Waldman and Galvin, 2008; Clegg et al., 2007); and that the concept is idealistic and difficult to apply in practice (Voegtlin, 2016), therefore requiring careful management of stakeholder's (sometimes competing) interests (Hiller et al., 2011). These challenges are thought to be further heightened in emerging economies (De Klerk et al., 2022; De Klerk & Swart, 2023). There has been limited progress in addressing these shortfalls. However, Muff et al. (2020) have attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice by developing their Competency Assessment for Responsible Leadership (CARL) tool to provide a measure of responsible leadership behaviours in organisations. This is an important development in understanding what makes responsible leaders and how these behaviours can be developed. Although, it is important to acknowledge that being a responsible leader is difficult (and more so in some contexts than others), and therefore the limitations of the concept reflect this (because of the difficult balancing act these leaders face).

### Theoretical Framing of AI

AI's role in leadership is still emerging. For this review, AI will be conceptually framed in two ways:

- **Augmentation vs. Substitution:** Does AI support leaders (augment) or replace decision-making (substitute)? AI is increasingly positioned as an augmentation tool, enabling leaders to offload routine tasks and focus on strategic, creative, and human-centered aspects of leadership (Wilson & Daugherty, 2018; Dellermann et al., 2021).
- **Ethical Agent vs. Tool:** Is AI a co-leader (ethical actor) or a neutral technological tool? While current technologies are typically viewed as tools, the rise of autonomous decision systems raises questions about AI's role in ethical judgment and accountability (Binns, 2018; Floridi & Cowls, 2019).

This dual framing helps situate AI's potential within responsible leadership, particularly where decision-making affects multiple stakeholders.

## Responsible Leadership and AI: Opportunities and Risks

Initial studies suggest AI can enhance strategic decision-making (Nakato et al., 2020) and leadership development (Aboumoussa & Pfister, 2024). Could it also prove useful in advancing responsible leadership behaviours? In aiming to answer this, this research proposes investigating the impact of AI on responsible leadership, to consider if the limitations of the concept can be reduced or eliminated by AI. This area is currently under researched (Ahmed et al., 2024), which is unsurprising given that generative AI is a relatively new technology.

However, there is some similar research being conducted in parallel outside of responsible leadership. Discussions are being had around the integration of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and AI ethics, for example, Ademola's (2024) recent analysis found that engaging stakeholders in AI governance led to more ethical, inclusive and sustainable outcomes. In addition, a recent empirical study by Ali et al. (2024) found that responsibly integrating AI helps organisations to grasp opportunities, overcome challenges and become leaders in digital technology. There are also practical examples that appear to show leaders of organisations using AI to advance responsible leadership principles (Whittington, 2024).

However, ethical dilemmas remain underexplored. Issues such as **algorithmic bias, surveillance, decision opacity, and job displacement** (Ahmed et al., 2024) present significant risks. These positive narratives must be balanced with literature on **AI governance and responsible innovation**.

## Research Aim and Questions

**Aim:** To determine how AI use in organisations impacts responsible leadership behaviours and the balancing of financial success, stakeholder needs, and sustainability.

The research will use the following operational definitions.

- **Responsible Leadership:** Leadership that ethically balances stakeholder interests, long-term sustainability, and organisational performance (Pless, 2023).
- **Responsible AI Practices:** The use of AI in ways that align with ethical standards, transparency, accountability, and stakeholder inclusion (Ahmed et al., 2024).

## Research Questions:

1. How is responsible leadership conceptualised and practiced in organisations utilising AI?
2. In what ways do AI tools impact leaders' ability to balance profit, sustainability and stakeholder needs? *(To be addressed in later stages of the study)*
3. What challenges arise in implementing responsible AI practices?
4. What strategies ensure AI use aligns with responsible leadership goals?

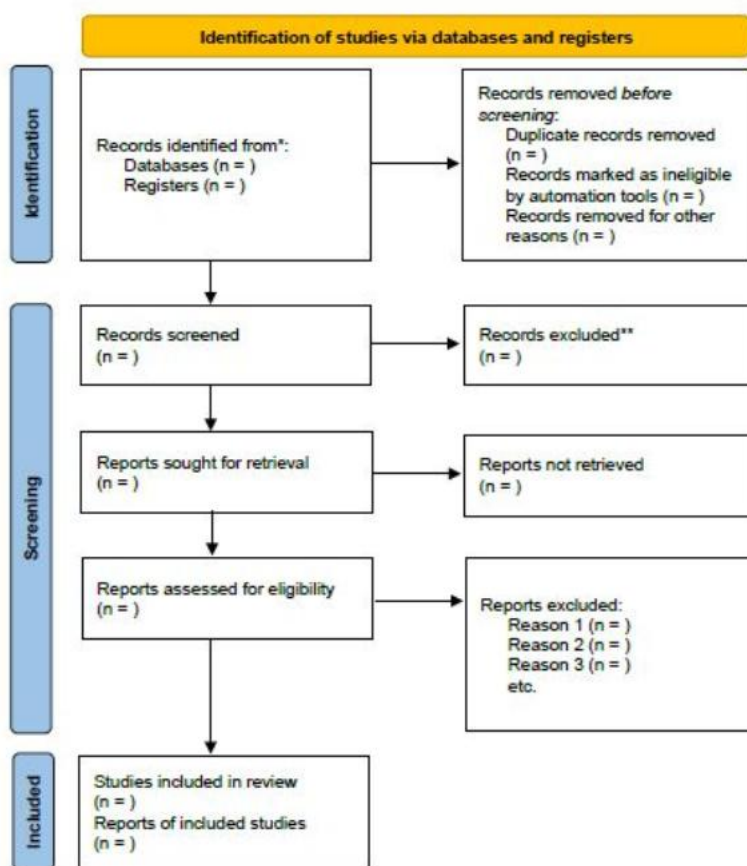
The SLR conducted in this phase of the study will address **Research Questions 1, 3, and 4**. **Research Question 2** will be addressed in the subsequent empirical phases.

## Methodology: Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

This Phase 1 study adopts the PRISMA methodology (2020) to enhance transparency and reproducibility. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach provides a clear framework for documenting each step of the review process, ensuring rigour and replicability (Mishra & Mishra, 2023).

The PRISMA flow will be followed through the following four stages: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion. The search strategy will be clearly documented and pre-registered before commencement to reduce bias.

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only



\*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/register).

\*\*If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

Figure 3: PRISMA Methodology (PRISMA, 2020)

## Search Strategy

Planned databases for this review include **Scopus**, **Business Source Premier**, and **Emerald Insight**. These databases are recognised for their comprehensive coverage of high-quality journals in business and management research (Macquarie University Library, 2025; Bond University Library, 2025).

Searches will focus on keywords in the **title** fields using Boolean operators:

- “Responsible Leadership” AND (“AI” OR “Artificial Intelligence” OR “Generative AI” OR “GenAI”)

The researcher will remain open to refining search terms and filters based on preliminary scoping searches to optimise result relevance and comprehensiveness.

## Screening & Inclusion Criteria

Search results will be imported into citation management software and deduplicated. Articles will then be screened by title and abstract to assess relevance. Where ambiguity remains, the full text will be reviewed.

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between up to and including 2025
- Written in English
- Focus on responsible leadership and AI in organisational or managerial contexts

Exclusion criteria:

- Articles not related to responsible leadership or AI
- Purely technical AI articles without a leadership context
- Non-peer-reviewed sources (unless justified for conceptual value)

A screening protocol will be developed to ensure consistent decision-making, and all reasons for exclusions will be logged.

## Data Extraction and Synthesis

All articles will be screened, deduplicated, and assessed in full text. A data extraction table will record:

- Authors, year, method, sector
- Leadership constructs
- Role and framing of AI
- Outcomes, risks, and ethical issues

Findings will be coded thematically to inform the interview design for Phase 2.

## **Conclusion**

This SLR lays the groundwork for an empirical investigation into how AI influences responsible leadership. The aim of the subsequent phases is to generate a practical model to guide organisations in using AI in ways that enhance responsible leadership behaviours.

Feedback from conference peers is invited to refine this research and support its contribution to the evolving field of sustainable and responsible business.

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