

Personal and Social Responsibility of the Leader in Favour of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Sustainable development and social responsibility are becoming increasingly important factors in the long-term development of organizations and society. Despite numerous standards, strategies, reports, and regulatory requirements, the question remains as to what constitutes the fundamental inner factor that motivates individuals to act responsibly in their everyday leadership practice. This paper is based on the assumption that sustainable development cannot be achieved in the long term solely through systems, rules, and reporting, but primarily through a leader's awareness of personal and social responsibility, reflected in daily choices and relationships with oneself, other people, the organization, and society as a whole.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the meaning of personal responsibility as a foundation for social responsibility and sustainable leadership. The paper is grounded in insights gained through long-term exploration of human psychology, human needs, behaviour, interpersonal relationships, and leadership, placing them within the context of contemporary approaches to sustainable development and social responsibility. It addresses the question of how awareness of one's own responsibility influences an individual's responsible behaviour and the creation of conditions that support the sustainable functioning of organizations and society.

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The paper is based on the concept of Wise Choice – MI (Modra Izbira in Slovene), which emphasizes the meaning of conscious leadership, decision-making, self-evaluation, and responsible behaviour in relation to oneself, other people, society, and the environment. The presented starting points are connected with contemporary research in the fields of personal responsibility, leadership, social responsibility, and sustainable development, and open a discussion on the meaning of a leader's inner stance as one of the key factors of a sustainable future.

Keywords: personal responsibility, social responsibility, leadership, sustainable development, sustainable leadership, Wise Choice - MI.

1 Introduction

Contemporary society is facing increasingly complex environmental, social, and economic challenges that require new approaches to the conscious leadership of organizations and social development. Over recent decades, sustainable development and social responsibility have become important guiding principles for organizational functioning and for co-creating a future that considers the needs of both present and future generations. This is also reflected in the development of various international guidelines, standards, and ESG approaches (Environmental, Social and Governance). Organizations are increasingly reporting on their sustainability practices, implementing codes of ethics, and developing social responsibility strategies aimed at contributing to the long-term sustainable development of the economy, society, and the environment (Elkington, 1997).

Particular importance is also given to sustainable development by the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which, through the Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizes the responsibility of organizations, institutions, and individuals in co-creating a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable society (United Nations, 2015).

Despite numerous standards, strategies, reports, and regulatory requirements, the question remains why some individuals and organizations act responsibly even when such behaviour is not prescribed, while others act differently despite clearly established rules. This raises the question of whether sustainable development and social responsibility can be achieved in the long term solely through systems, rules, and control mechanisms, or whether responsible behaviour requires a deeper internal factor.

This paper is based on the assumption that sustainable development cannot be achieved in the long term solely through systems, rules, and reporting. The foundation of sustainable action is a leader's awareness of personal and social responsibility, reflected in their daily choices, decisions, and relationships with themselves, other people, the organization, and society as a whole. In this context, an important question arises regarding how leaders understand their responsibility and to what extent they are aware of the impact of their behaviour on people, the organization, and the environment in which they operate.

The term Wise Choice - MI (Modra Izbira in Slovene) refers to wise self-awareness and conscious, responsible behaviour in favour of quality relationships and in favour of all. The abbreviation MI is retained from the original Slovenian name *Modra Izbira*. In Slovenian, the word "MI" also means "we", symbolizing community, cooperation, interconnectedness, and shared responsibility, which are also among the core principles of the MI approach.

The paper is based on the insights of the Wise Choice - MI approach, which emphasizes the importance of conscious self-leadership, self-evaluation, and responsible action in favour of oneself, other people, society, and the environment. It is grounded in the understanding that individuals cannot directly lead other people, but they can lead themselves and, through their choices, create conditions for responsible cooperation, the development of trust, and sustainable functioning. This understanding is consistent with contemporary insights into personal responsibility, internal motivation, and leadership, which emphasize the importance of an individual's inner stance, self-reflection, and awareness of their influence on others (Glasser, 1998; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

The central question of this paper is therefore whether personal responsibility is the fundamental factor that enables the development of social responsibility and the creation of conditions for a sustainable long-term future.

1.1 Purpose, Objectives and Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of a leader's personal responsibility as one of the fundamental factors of social responsibility and sustainable development. The paper explores the

relationship between a leader's personal responsibility, their behaviour, and the impact they have on the organization, society, and the environment.

Particular attention is devoted to the Wise Choice - MI approach, which emphasizes the importance of conscious self-leadership, self-evaluation, and responsible action for the benefit of all. The paper is based on the assumption that social responsibility cannot be developed in the long term without the personal responsibility of the individual.

The central research question of the paper is:

How does a leader's personal responsibility influence socially responsible behaviour and contribute to the sustainable development of organizations and society?

The following sub-questions arise from the main research question:

- *What is the relationship between a leader's personal and social responsibility?*
- *How can conscious self-leadership contribute to the sustainable functioning of organizations and society?*
- *What is the significance of the Wise Choice approach in understanding responsible leadership?*

2 Research Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative theoretical approach and a conceptual analysis of the literature in the fields of personal responsibility, leadership, social responsibility, and sustainable development. In developing the theoretical foundations, relevant scientific and professional works by domestic and international authors were **used**, selected based on their content-related connection to the research question, addressing the importance of individual responsibility, intrinsic motivation, self-leadership, and the influence of leadership on the development of organizations and society.

Particular attention is devoted to examining the relationship between an individual's personal responsibility and the social responsibility of organizations, as well as their contribution to sustainable development. The paper also includes an analysis of contemporary concepts of sustainable development, social responsibility, and ESG approaches.

In addition to the literature review, the paper is also based on the author's more than twenty years of professional experience, insights, and observations gained through the exploration of human psychology, human needs, behaviour, interpersonal relationships, leadership, and the development of individuals, teams, and organizations. These insights are presented through the Wise Choice (MI) approach, which represents the author's framework for understanding conscious self-leadership, personal responsibility, and responsible action in relation to other people, society, and the environment.

The author's professional observations and practical experiences were continuously compared with theoretical insights from the literature, based on which the conceptual foundations of the Wise Choice (MI) approach were developed.

Based on a synthesis of theoretical foundations and the author's professional insights, the paper develops a conceptual perspective on a leader's awareness of personal and social responsibility as one of the key factors of sustainable development.

3 Personal Responsibility of a Leader

In contemporary discussions on leadership, sustainable development, and social responsibility, the greatest attention is often devoted to organizational systems, processes, strategies, and standards. Although these play an important role in guiding organizational activities, they do not in themselves

ensure responsible behaviour by individuals. Every system is ultimately implemented through people, their decisions, behaviours, and relationships.

Therefore, the question of a leader's personal responsibility comes to the forefront. Personal responsibility refers to an individual's ability to recognize the connection between their choices, behaviour, and the consequences that their actions have for themselves, other people, and the wider environment. It is not based on external control or coercion, but rather on an internal awareness of one's own role and influence.

The Wise Choice - MI approach is based on the understanding that an individual can directly lead only themselves. Although leaders often speak about leading people, their greatest responsibility is, in fact, the ability to lead their own thinking, actions, and responses. The way a leader acts in everyday situations significantly influences the quality of cooperation, the level of trust, and the willingness of others to act responsibly.

Personal responsibility is therefore not merely one of a leader's competencies, but rather the foundation of their actions. A leader who takes responsibility for their choices is aware that, through their behaviour, they co-create the circumstances in which other people work, collaborate, and make decisions. Their influence is reflected not only in achieving organizational goals, but also in creating conditions for individual development, quality relationships, and a responsible organizational culture.

This understanding of personal responsibility is consistent with the insights of William Glasser (1998), who emphasizes that individuals are responsible for their choices and behaviour, and that long-term change is not the result of controlling others, but of an individual's willingness to exercise internal control, engage in self-evaluation, and take responsibility for their own choices. Similarly, Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that more sustainable and higher-quality performance originates from intrinsic motivation rather than external pressure. Contemporary leadership research further confirms that leaders with higher levels of self-reflection, personal responsibility, and awareness of their own influence create more inclusive, ethical, and sustainability-oriented work environments (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).⁴

Personal responsibility represents an important foundation for socially responsible behaviour. Contemporary understandings of social responsibility likewise emphasize that organizational responsibility is realized through the responsibility of individuals who, through their decisions and actions, co-create organizational culture and influence the broader social environment (Mulej, 2013; IRDO, 2025). Therefore, the question of social responsibility cannot be separated from the question of individual personal responsibility.

From the perspective of sustainable development, personal responsibility is not merely an individual characteristic, but an important social factor. The socially responsible behaviour of organizations begins with the individuals who make everyday decisions. The more aware leaders are of their responsibility and influence, the greater the likelihood that their decisions and actions will take into account the long-term consequences for people, the organization, society, and the environment.

4 Wise Choice - MI as a Framework for Responsible Leadership

Contemporary approaches to leadership increasingly emphasize the importance of a leader's inner stance, self-reflection, personal responsibility, and awareness of the impact of their own behaviour on other people. The focus is no longer placed solely on managing processes, goals, and results, but primarily on the individual, their capacity for self-awareness, self-reflection, acting in accordance with their values, and leadership grounded in a clear purpose and meaning (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Sinek, 2009). From the perspective of the Wise Choice - MI approach, this also means the ability to act consciously in relation to oneself, other people, and the environment.

This paper is based on the Wise Choice - MI approach, which is grounded in more than twenty years of research into human psychology, human needs, values, behaviour, interpersonal relationships, and

leadership, as well as extensive practical experience gained through collaboration with leaders, individuals, and organizations.

Why Wise Choice - MI?

The name Modra izbira – MI is retained in its original Slovenian form as the official designation of the approach. In English, the term Modra izbira is translated as Wise Choice. The abbreviation MI derives from the first letters of the words Modra izbira and also represents the logo of the approach. The name carries a dual meaning: Wise Choice as a conscious choice arising from self-awareness and a holistic understanding of the human being, relationships, and responsible action for the benefit of all, and the Slovenian word “MI”, which means “we” in English, as a symbol of community, cooperation, interconnectedness, and the common good.

Wise Choice - MI represents the author's psychological approach, which combines insights from various branches of human psychology, including Choice Theory – Reality Therapy, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Emotional Intelligence, soft skills, and other branches of psychology, together with the author's own insights. These insights were integrated into a whole, which the author named Wise Choice - MI.

The Wise Choice - MI approach provides organizations with a framework for developing personal responsibility, conscious self-leadership, and socially responsible action. It emphasizes the development of self-awareness, the quality of relationships, and the conscious choice of behaviours that contribute to the well-being of individuals, organizations, society, and the environment.

Wise Choice - MI is based on the understanding that individuals cannot directly lead other people, but 5 they can lead themselves. It is precisely in the way an individual leads oneself, understands one's needs, choices, and responsibility, that the conditions for quality leadership, cooperation, people development, and the long-term responsible functioning of organizations are created.

A fundamental premise of Wise Choice - MI is that individuals are responsible for their behaviour, choices, and responses. Although people are often unable to influence all circumstances, they can influence how they choose to respond to them.

Within the Wise Choice - MI approach, personal responsibility is the responsibility for how we lead ourselves, not for how we lead other people. It is grounded in self-awareness, which arises from a holistic understanding of human beings, their needs and the needs of others, in the awareness of the impact of one's behaviour on others, and in self-evaluation and the conscious choosing of behaviours that contribute to greater understanding, cooperation, and the common good.

Through this understanding, an individual becomes aware of a fundamental principle of personal responsibility according to the principles of Wise Choice - MI: a person is personally responsible when they are a good circumstance for others and, through their choices of behaviour, enable others to satisfy their needs in their presence.

We are personally responsible when we choose relationship and supportive behaviours through which others can feel understood, seen, heard, important, free, and connected.

This understanding is closely linked to William Glasser's Choice Theory (1998), which emphasizes that human behaviour arises from the effort to satisfy basic psychological needs. Glasser highlights that individuals cannot effectively influence others in the long term through control, coercion, or external pressure, but primarily through quality relationships and personal responsibility for their own behaviour. His insights confirm the importance of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and conscious choice as important factors of personal development and responsible behaviour.

Important support for this understanding is also provided by the research of Deci and Ryan (2000), who, within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, emphasize that people are more responsible, creative, and sustainably motivated when they act from intrinsic motivation rather than merely in response to external pressures. Similarly, Gallup research shows that leaders have the greatest influence on organizational culture through their behaviour, communication, and their ability to foster a sense of meaning, responsibility, and belonging among people. Such an environment enables individuals to develop their potential and contribute more actively to the shared goals of the organization (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

From the perspective of Wise Choice - MI, responsible leadership is therefore not primarily a matter of control, but a matter of awareness. The more aware leaders are of themselves, their needs, beliefs, responses, and influence on others, the greater their ability to create conditions in which people can develop a sense of safety, belonging, respect, significance, and cooperation. Such an environment encourages greater engagement, responsibility, and willingness to co-create solutions.

This understanding is also connected with contemporary directions in social responsibility and ESG approaches, which increasingly emphasize the importance of ethical leadership, organizational culture, psychological safety, and the responsible behaviour of leaders. The growing recognition is that sustainable development cannot be built solely on rules, reports, and indicators, but primarily on people who are aware of the responsibility of their decisions and their impact on the wider social and natural environment (United Nations, 2015; ISO 26000, 2010).

Wise Choice - MI therefore understands personal responsibility as the foundation of social responsibility. Only individuals who are aware of themselves and their influence on others can consciously contribute to creating relationships, organizations, and communities based on respect, cooperation, and sustainable development. Awareness of one's own responsibility is one of the key factors in the development of leadership that transcends short-term interests and contributes to the long-term well-being of people, organizations, and society.

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4.1 How an individual as a leader develops conscious self-leadership through the Wise Choice - MI approach

Individuals who have not learned to lead themselves will find it difficult to lead others responsibly in the long term, build quality relationships, or contribute to the sustainable development of organizations and society. Therefore, the central question of responsible leadership is not how to change other people, but how to consciously lead oneself.

Basic foundations of understanding how to lead oneself for the development of personal responsibility according to the Wise Choice - MI approach:

- **self-awareness** – understanding oneself, one's own needs, values, behaviours, and beliefs;
- **understanding relationships** – awareness of how our behaviour influences other people and relationships;
- **self-evaluation** – conscious evaluation of one's own behaviours and choices in specific situations;
- **conscious choice of behaviours** – choosing behaviours that contribute to understanding, cooperation, and the common good.

The Wise Choice - MI approach assumes that, through self-awareness and self-evaluation, an individual develops greater awareness of oneself, responsible action, and the influence of one's behaviours on other people and relationships, including their consequences.

An important part of self-leadership is self-evaluation, through which individuals ask themselves the following questions:

- What am I choosing in this situation?
- How does my behaviour affect other people?

- How can I contribute in a way that serves all?

The presented foundations and self-evaluation questions represent the basic framework for understanding self-leadership and personal responsibility according to the Wise Choice - MI approach. A holistic understanding of the human being, relationships, and leading oneself represents a broader area that requires a deeper understanding of the human being and relationships.

The development of personal responsibility requires an understanding of how to lead oneself as a leader. When a leader becomes aware of this understanding and consciously chooses behaviours in this direction, they create conditions for personally responsible action, as others can satisfy their basic needs in their presence. Through their behavioural choices, they simultaneously act in a socially responsible way, as they act in favour of themselves, other people, the organization, society, and the environment.

This understanding of self-leadership is consistent with contemporary research in the fields of intrinsic motivation, personal responsibility, and leadership, which emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, conscious behaviour, and an individual's inner orientation as important factors of sustainable and socially responsible action.

5 Social Responsibility of Leaders

The importance of personal responsibility is also reflected in contemporary approaches to social responsibility. The ISO 26000 standard defines social responsibility as an organization's responsibility for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment and emphasizes ethical, transparent, and accountable behaviour in all organizational relationships (SIST ISO 26000, 2010).

The IRDO Institute also understands social responsibility in a broader sense, not only as the responsibility of organizations but also as the responsibility of individuals, professional groups, organizations, and society as a whole toward people and nature. In doing so, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals with various stakeholders and responsibility for the consequences of their own actions (IRDO, 2025; Bergant, 2019).

These foundations confirm that social responsibility cannot be considered separately from the personal responsibility of individuals. Organizations do not operate independently; rather, they function through people, their decisions, behaviours, and relationships. The more leaders and individuals are aware of their impact on other people and the environment, the greater the likelihood that their decisions will be directed toward the long-term well-being of the organization, society, and the environment.

Leaders bear a particular responsibility in this regard, as they significantly influence organizational culture, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making processes through their example. Research shows that leaders, through their behaviour, play an important role in shaping the levels of trust, collaboration, and responsibility within organizations (Maak & Pless, 2006).

This understanding is also connected to contemporary ESG approaches, which emphasize organizational responsibility for environmental, social, and governance impacts. The implementation of ESG principles does not depend solely on systems and indicators but also on the individuals who put these principles into practice on a daily basis.

From the perspective of the Wise Choice - MI approach, social responsibility is not something separate from personal responsibility but rather its natural extension. Individuals who are aware of themselves and of the impact of their behaviours on others are better able to make decisions and choose behaviours that contribute to the common good and to the creation of conditions for the long-term sustainable functioning of organizations and society.

6 Responsibility in Support of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is not merely a question of environmental measures, strategies, or organizational policies, but also a question of responsible behaviour of individuals who implement these orientations in practice.

Sustainable development is understood as a long-term oriented way of acting that connects care for people, society, the economy, and the environment. Responsibility in this context means awareness of the impact of one's decisions and behaviour on long-term consequences at all three levels: the individual, society, and nature.

If personal responsibility represents the foundation of responsible individual behaviour and social responsibility represents responsibility for the impact of our actions on others, then sustainable development represents the broader goal to which such behaviour contributes.

From the perspective of the Wise Choice - MI approach, sustainable development begins with the awareness that every behaviour has certain consequences. Personal responsibility, social responsibility, and sustainable development are therefore not separate concepts, but interconnected processes that together create the foundations for a long-term sustainable future.

From this perspective, sustainable development is not merely a goal, but a way of understanding and acting of the individual in relation to oneself, others, and the environment.

7 Conclusion

The article is based on the question of how a leader's personal responsibility influences socially responsible behaviour and sustainable development. The presented starting points show that responsible action cannot be built solely on systems, rules, and formal guidelines, but primarily on individuals who are aware of their impact on other people and the environment.

The paper connects a leader's personal and social responsibility and highlights their interrelationship. Social responsibility cannot be considered separately from the personal responsibility of the individual, 8 as organizational culture, the quality of relationships, and sustainable functioning are realized through the everyday behaviours of people and leaders.

The article also opens reflection on the importance of conscious self-leadership. The Wise Choice - MI approach emphasizes that responsible leadership begins with self-leadership, self-reflection, and self-awareness of one's own influence. In this lies its contribution to understanding personal and social responsibility in contemporary leadership.

The key premise of the paper is that a leader's personal responsibility represents the foundation for the development of social responsibility and the sustainable functioning of organizations.

Understanding responsibility through the Wise Choice - MI approach can contribute to organizations by developing higher-quality leadership, cooperation, greater employee engagement and effectiveness, and more sustainable decision-making. At the societal level, it contributes to the development of more responsible relationships, greater care for the common good, and the creation of conditions for long-term sustainable development.

The originality of the paper lies in connecting the Wise Choice - MI approach with the question of personal and social responsibility of leaders and sustainable development.

A limitation of the paper is its conceptual nature, as it does not include empirical research. Future research could test the presented foundations in different organizational environments and explore the relationship between leaders' personal responsibility, organizational culture, and sustainable outcomes.

Awareness of personal and social responsibility is therefore not only important for the individual or the organization, but also represents an important contribution to creating more responsible relationships, sustainable organizations, and a long-term viable future.

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