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**Title:** Principles of responsibility in varying leadership contexts

**Year:** 2019

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

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**Please cite the original version:**

Lämsä, A.-M., & Keränen, A. (2019). Principles of responsibility in varying leadership contexts. In A. Kumar Dey, & H. Lehtimäki (Eds.), *Ethics and Responsibility in Human Resources, Leadership and Start-up Business* (pp. 141-150). Bloomsbury.

Paper for ICMC2018

<http://bimtech.ac.in/icmc/>

Case Code No.:

Principles of responsibility in varying leadership contexts

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**Abstract**

In this study, the understanding of the principles of responsibility in leadership between manager and employee is advanced. Through a qualitative case study approach the following research questions are answered: What principles of responsibility do managers and employees perceive as significant for leadership in the manager-employee relationship? What social contexts in the relationship call for the principles to occur? The topic was studied in two executive MBA groups which are our cases. The participants in these special groups have a lot of experience of leadership as both leader and employee. So, they can offer real life data from which results can be built. Additionally, such group provides an opportunity to the participants to reflect various leadership incidents in their career that is useful for study purposes. The case study approach makes it possible to learn more of the complexity of leadership than for example surveying a representative sample. A sample of 22 people were studied. A critical incident technique was applied to produce the data, and a content analysis of the data was carried out. Conceptualization that shows the principles of responsibility in leadership – fairness, empowerment, openness, trust, and caring – and their contextual nature in the manager-employee relationship was formed. This study contributes to diminishing the distinction commonly made in the leadership literature between leader-centred and relational-centred approaches.

*Keywords:* Case study, content analysis, critical incident, leadership, responsibility

## **Introduction**

Traditional power constellations are seen to be losing their significance in leadership in many contemporary organizations, and the challenge of leadership now is to exert influence without holding a formal position of power (Maak & Pless, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Keränen, 2015). This poses a challenge in terms of responsibility for both manager and employee in the organization: when a formal position does not matter so much and more shared forms of leadership are occurring (Pearce et al., 2014), what kind of responsibility does this mean?

Leadership research has predominantly been based on the idea that leadership is a leader-centered phenomenon (Hosking, 2011). In our view this perspective gives a too static, individualistic and limited view of the topic, only stressing the characteristics and behavior of the individual leader. In this study, in line with Hosking (2011, p. 456), we argue that responsible leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon, a specific organizing process in which responsibility is constructed dynamically by the parties involved.

According to Waldman (2014), there is a natural link between corporate social responsibility and leadership, because socially responsible behavior cannot emerge without the influence of leadership. When organizations want to increase their role in integrating social responsibility within the organizational functioning, much depends on how leadership can support the adaptation of responsibility in the organization (Huhtala et al., 2013; Witt & Stahl, 2015). However, previous research on corporate social responsibility has mainly focused on external stakeholders than at relationships within organizations (Kazlauskaite et al., 2013).

## **Objectives**

In this study, our interest is in the dyadic relationship between manager and employee within organizations. In particular, the understanding of the principles of responsibility in

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leadership between manager and employee is advanced. Through a qualitative case study approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) the following research questions are answered:

- 1) What principles of responsibility do managers and employees perceive as significant for leadership in the manager-employee relationship?
- 2) What social contexts in the relationship call for the principles to occur?

The topic is studied in two executive MBA (eMBA) groups which are our cases. The participants in these special groups have a lot of experience of leadership as both leader and employee. So, they can offer real life data from which results can be built. Such group provides an opportunity to the participants to reflect various leadership incidents in their career (Lämsä & Savela, 2019) that is useful for study purposes. The case study approach makes it possible to learn more of the complexity of leadership than for example surveying a representative sample (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

### **Theoretical background**

This research draws on an increasing number of leadership studies which view leadership as socially constructed and relational (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2011; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Keränen, 2015), and combines this view with the ideas of corporate social responsibility (e.g. Carroll, 2016). Relational leadership does not make a distinction between people in positions of leadership and those who are not, nor does it seek to explore leaders' (or followers') traits or behavioral styles, as the traditional approach to leadership does (Yukl, 2010), but rather it understands leadership as continuously negotiated and produced in relational processes (Hosking, 2011).

In general, the definition of responsibility that is accepted at any given time reflects professional, social, and cultural understandings and expectations of what is acceptable, desirable, and laudable behavior. Corporate social responsibility can be defined as the

company's aim to advance the expectations and goals of its stakeholders (Crane & Matten, 2010). Although corporate social responsibility focuses mainly on organizational level responsibility, previous research shows that how leadership is exerted between individuals also has an effect on organizational level phenomena (Huhtala et al., 2013). From the viewpoint of relational leadership this refers to the idea that, to show responsibility, parties in a leadership relationship need to acknowledge each other's expectations and be willing and able to meet them whenever appropriate and desirable. Responsibility is something the parties perform and do in relation to each other (Keränen, 2015).

In the field of leadership studies, responsibility has usually been approached through the concepts and theories of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002), transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994), authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2004), and ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006), among others. Servant leadership is based on the principle that the leader's task is to serve the followers' needs and to advance the interests of the community (Greenleaf, 2002). In transformational leadership the leader must on the one hand engage the followers in meeting the organization's goals, and on the other further the moral development of all parties (Bass & Avolio, 1994). It is important that the leader motivates the followers and relates to them as individuals. Also crucial is enabling a sense of freedom, personal judgment, and independent decision-making in one's work. Such enabling is also called empowerment. Empowerment means that people feel they are engaged in meaningful and important work that allows them to make full use of their capabilities and unleashes creativity and responsibility (Ciulla, 2006). From the perspective of authentic leadership, it is essential that one should be as consistent and honest as possible toward oneself as well as toward others. Concord between words and deeds is crucial (Avolio et al., 2004). The purpose of ethical leadership is to promote the commitment of the parties in leadership to shared ethical principles (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Maak and Pless (2009) define responsible leadership as a cooperative relationship between leaders and stakeholders that is rooted in principles that guide the parties' actions and is based on a sense of shared purpose. This shared goal motivates and engages the parties to strive for sustainable change that will lead to positive outcomes for everyone. Good relationships are built on mutual trust (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Trust, in turn, is fostered by integrity, fairness, and leadership competence. Waldman and Galvin (2008) stress that responsible leadership has both a moral and a legal basis, within whose parameters leaders must act and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

### **Methods**

For the purposes of this study a sample of 22 individuals was recruited through two cases which are two eMBA groups in Finland. To get a rich view to the topic we aimed to a heterogeneous sample (see Bryman, 2011). Six nationalities were represented. The participants were on average 40 years old and all had several years' work experience both as employee and manager. 15 respondents were women. The data consist of short stories or anecdotes about the respondents' personal experiences of responsible leadership in the manager-employee relationship from the perspectives of both manager and employee. In other words, each participant told at least one story of their own experiences and practices from both the manager's and employee's perspective. The stories were collected via an online form that made use of the critical incident technique originally developed by Flanagan (1954). In Flanagan's approach, the critical incident technique encourages participants to share their experiences and to describe in detail how an actual situation unfolded.

A qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data (see details Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In particular, directed content analysis, which makes use of theory and previous research findings as resources in analyzing empirical data, was applied. This kind of method means that the theoretical background of the study supports the analysis, but it does

not determine the presentation of results or the formation of conclusions (Bryman, 2011). In other words, the purpose of directed content analysis is not to test an existing theory but to contribute to greater conceptual clarity and understanding of the phenomenon in question.

## **Results**

As the result of the analysis process the data were abstracted and distilled into principles of responsible leadership in the manager-follower relationship. These were labeled *fairness, empowerment, openness, trust, and caring*. We will now examine one by one the principles.

### **Fairness**

Pursuing the principle of *fairness* makes it possible for the parties involved to feel that they are treated with respect and are seen as equal in the relationship. In particular, the respondents stressed that the manager cannot allow her/his attitudes and feelings to affect any decisions she/he has to make: the manager must remain objective in her/his evaluation of the employee. It was mentioned that, for example, gender, age or personality should not play a role in anyone's decision-making.

Particularly in a question of the allocation of resources among employees, followers' expectations and experience regarding the fairness of the manager's behavior are important. Comparisons between subordinates are difficult and cause managers some uneasiness. It is seen as an important aspect of fairness that the manager remains neutral in evaluating subordinates and does not allow her/his personal opinions and feelings to affect the evaluation. One manager described a situation in which it was necessary to fire an employee and her/his success in remaining neutral in that situation as follows:

I had been forced to let a subordinate go for operational and financial reasons. I had not chosen this individual as my subordinate. Given her personality, I wouldn't have selected her in a recruiting situation, but she did her job very well and professionally.



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After the termination she asked me to be a referee for her and I said yes. I provided a reference and she obtained a new position right away. I was really pleased that I had been able to evaluate her professional skills neutrally and to put aside my personal opinions.

Fairness was described as occurring in social contexts in which the allocation of resources was at issue, for example, in the contexts of rewarding, appraisal and dismissals. Although the respondents considered the principle of fairness important in evaluating the results of resource distribution, the importance of this principle in the process of decision-making and daily practices concerning resources allocation was even more evident in the data. Respondents mentioned adherence to commonly applicable rules of the game as a significant behavioral guideline. If the rules and precepts of the workplace were changed, the respondents stressed the importance of informing everyone of the changes clearly and in good time.

In sum, in the respondents' stories, various kinds of fairness were mentioned: not only distributive fairness, but also processual and compensatory fairness. The importance of processual fairness was particularly emphasized; the respondents mentioned that it is often more important than distributive fairness for the experience of fairness. The social context of resources allocation brought out the principle of fairness.

### **Empowerment**

According to the respondents, *empowerment* refers to the process in which the parties can express ideas, make decisions and influence an issue. The parties are supported by each other and learn to take more responsibility to promote issues and ideas under development. According to the respondents, empowerment cannot be given to just anyone, but rather depends on how enabling the work environment in general is. The respondents stressed that

one party cannot directly empower another, but empowerment can be subtly enabled in the workplace.

The respondents felt it was important that everyone in the workplace knows what the goals of the work are, but also that everyone has an opportunity to participate in defining those goals. However, merely setting the goals is not sufficient; their achievement also needs to be tracked and evaluated. According to the respondents, empowerment promotes a supportive and encouraging rapport between the parties. The respondents also believed that publicizing successes is important because it reinforces people's faith in their ability to achieve the goals. Success and the achievement of goals were marked by, for example, a social event for the staff one evening:

The management and the employees set shared goals together. Once the goals were met, everyone was immediately informed, and an evening of entertainment for the entire personnel was organized according to a previously agreed-upon plan.

Employees' participation promotes empowerment. In the respondents' view, managers and employees have capacities to develop the organization. They felt that making decisions and doing things together foster empowerment.

In sum, the respondents mentioned that an important factor in enabling empowerment is the participation of all parties in decision-making in the workplace. In particular, a supportive and encouraging attitude to everyone's participation was described as a crucial condition of empowerment. Empowerment was connected to the social context of development and change – in one's own work as well as in the broader organizational context.

### **Openness**

In general, the respondents felt that openness in the relationship was an indication of responsibility. However, views regarding how open such a relationship ought to be varied.

Openness could simply mean communication between the parties, for example when managers talked openly to their subordinates and made sure that everyone has up-to-date information about matters affecting the workplace. However, a deeper level of open interaction, with the goal of fostering discussion between the parties about relevant matters, was also brought out by the respondents. The following example demonstrates how one manager stressed that openness between the manager and the employee can be established right from the start:

I talk openly also about challenging situations, so that right from the start the new employee gets as realistic an image of the job as possible. Such challenging situations are also often highly instructive for the future. I always try to make the situation relaxed and open, so the newcomer feels comfortable asking questions and talking about things that come up.

Openness at work promotes the deepening of interaction into genuine discussion between the manager and the employee. It gives the participants an opportunity to evaluate whether they are also able to communicate difficult and complex issues in a way that is accessible to everyone. The ability of the parties to discuss things openly reinforces the relationship between them and helps to clarify expectations. Managers also often found themselves in situations in which they could not share all they knew with their subordinates. They felt that this could undermine responsibility. The issue is particularly pronounced for middle management, who receive directions from senior management.

In sum, the study participants emphasized that the social context in which there is a call for this principle is in communication between the manager and employee. However, understanding of how open the relationship is may vary, and this variation can be categorized into three levels. The most superficial level is one-way communication – predominantly from the manager to the employee. A deeper level of openness occurs when the parties also give

each other feedback, and so interaction is part of the relationship. Finally, openness can mean dialogue, open conversation and the exchange of ideas between manager and employee. On this level, which, according to the respondents, occurred rather rarely in practice, both parties were described as active initiators of open discussion.

### **Trust**

According to the respondents, the central feature of trust between the manager and the employee is that both parties honor mutual agreements and respect promises or contracts even when an opportunity not to do so arises. Consistency between words and actions is essential to the construction of a relationship of trust. The following comment by an employee illustrates this:

I was moving from one job to another, but because no substitute was found for me, I stayed over the summer and worked in both places. I stayed because I had earlier promised to stay in my old position over the summer. In this case responsibility comes from keeping your promises.

The promise was described as deriving not solely from personal values but also from those of the workplace. Consequently, these values and their basis should be made known to all parties, for example in the form of a publicized target value. According to the respondents, trust can also be based on the promise of specific behavior, develops gradually and experientially among the parties through shared activity and experiences.

Since trust requires adherence to the rules of the game, respondents reported that failure to follow the rules results in disappointment. For example, one manager felt that she had betrayed both herself and her subordinates by failing to do her job in a way that she considered generally acceptable and desirable for a manager. A significant determinant of employees' trust in the manager is whether the manager addresses promptly any problems

that emerge in the workplace and does not sweep them under the carpet or allow any unnecessary delay in responding to them.

In sum, trust is at the same time a condition for responsibility to occur and a result of responsible leadership. Consistency of words and actions on both parts was emphasized as being essential to mutual trust. The central feature of trust is that the parties honor mutual agreements and do not break promises or contracts even if an opportunity to do so presents itself. Thus, the social context in which the importance of trust is said to occur is the context of both formal and informal agreements between the parties.

### **Caring**

The core of caring lies in the ability to recognize the needs of another person and respond to those needs in the way that the person expects. This entails recognizing and acknowledging the other as a subject and an individual; seeking to understand genuinely his or her needs; and responding to those needs in a constructive and appropriate manner. Caring implies that no one is left in the lurch; rather, one supports others in demanding and difficult circumstances. One respondent, in the role of an employee, had noticed a new supervisor's need for help and support and described her response as follows:

My supervisor had started the job a couple of weeks earlier and was about to attend a meeting for the first time. I realized that my supervisor was not aware that she was expected to act as the chair of the meeting and to prepare the agenda and the items to be discussed in advance. I had substituted for my previous supervisor in this meeting, so I suggested that I put together the materials and a script for her for the meeting. Thanks to the materials I produced, my supervisor "passed" the meeting with flying colors.

The respondents found it challenging that expectations are often varied and mutually conflicting. Fulfilling expectations therefore requires balancing and mediation. Responding to

and balancing the manifold needs of others can also lead to strain and overwork unless a boundary is maintained between one's own capacities and others' expectations. According to the respondents, recognizing a need and figuring out how best to address it require subtlety, the ability to see things from another person's perspective, and contextual understanding.

The respondents felt that faced with difficult problems, one need not always personally be the provider of help and support. It may not even be desirable, if suitable action requires greater professional expertise or skills than one possesses. According to the respondents, recognizing when one is capable of providing help and support and when one ought to seek expert assistance from elsewhere is part of responsible caring. Sometimes one's own efforts can be constructively combined with those of an expert.

The importance of caring is emphasized in situations that involve coping with stress and resolving interpersonal tensions that strain the harmony of the relationship. The resolution of such problems and the achievement of genuine caring require seeing the situation through another's eyes and looking at relevant issues and people from multiple perspectives.

In sum, according to the respondents, the core of caring lies in the ability to recognize the needs of another person and respond to those needs in the way that the person hopes and expects. It was stressed that this entails recognizing and acknowledging the other as a subject and an individual; seeking to understand genuinely his or her needs; and responding to those needs constructively and appropriately. Caring implies that no one is left without the support they need. The social context in which the principle of caring was said to be of importance is when either of the parties experiences problems, often difficult and ambiguous ones, mainly in the work arena but also in private life.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

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In this study we followed the idea that responsible leadership needs to be understood as dynamic, as a kind of entity which cannot be distinguished from the context in which it arises. We showed the dynamics of responsible leadership in the manager-employee dyad, and how each principle of responsible leadership is related to its context.

In line with Maak and Pless (2006), we suggest that, in practice, relational intelligence, meaning someone's ability to understand not only legal but ethical as well as emotional challenges in leadership and be aware of and understand the dynamics of social relationships with others (Waldman, 2014), is important for responsible leadership. However, contrary to Maak and Pless (2006), who emphasize the leader's ability, the results of this study indicate that all parties in the relationship need this kind of ability; the employee no less than the manager. All in all, the results suggest that in leadership practices, all parties need to pay attention to and understand the contextual nature of responsible leadership so that the appropriate principles are applied in the appropriate social contexts.

We think that even though the development of the relational leadership paradigm (see Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) and responsible leadership have been studied to some extent (e.g. Maak & Pless, 2006; Waldman & Galvin, 2008; Pless & Maak, 2011; Voegtlin 2011; Keränen 2015), research combining social responsibility and relational leadership, which was our focus here, is still in its early stages: we need to know much more in order to understand the phenomenon. It would be important to investigate responsible leadership at various levels of leadership – the individual, dyadic, group and organization levels, and in the organization's external relationships.

Studying the topic from a broader societal and cultural angle could also be useful. For example, the study of Witt and Stahl (2015) suggested that executives' responsibility orientations to the company's stakeholders and wider society may vary both between and within Asian societies and the West. Consequently, it is possible that expectations concerning

responsibility and appropriate ways of meeting those expectations and having them met might vary from one socio-cultural environment to another.

To conclude, despite the importance of the manager's responsibility in many of the principles of responsible leadership detected in this study, the traditional idea of a strong, even heroic and charismatic leader, which has long prevailed in the leadership literature and in discussion of the subject is now beginning to change (Keränen, 2015): responsible leadership is coming to be seen more as a process shared between manager and employee. This study suggests that the level of sharing depends on the social context, and possibly too on the power dynamics between the parties involved.

### **Acknowledgments**

This research was part of the programme Equality in Society (WeAll project, 292883), supported by strategic research funding of the Academy of Finland (weallfinland.fi). We gratefully acknowledge this support.

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