

Modelling the Models: An Integrative Review and Conceptual Framework for Leadership in Sustainable Enterprise in Asia



Jagvir Singh Jaglan^{1*}

^{1*}PhD Scholar, Indian Institute of Management Ranchi, India. ORCID: 0009-0008-1686-3253,
Email:jagvirsingh.jaglan25eph@iimranchi.ac.in

Abstract

Leadership scholarship has proliferated into partially overlapping models, while sustainability research has added labels such as sustainable, responsible, green, environmentally specific and regenerative leadership. For enterprises in Asia, the central problem is not choosing among labels but identifying which influence mechanisms are viable for a particular sustainability and entrepreneurial challenge, and whether newer models add theoretical value beyond established processes. This integrative review develops a mechanism- and configuration-based framework that compares leadership models at the level of behaviors, causal processes, goals, stakeholder boundaries, system boundaries and contextual conditions. It proposes eight recurring mechanism families and embeds them in the Modelling-the-Models Leadership Configuration Cube (M²-LCC), defined by concern for people, concern for performance and responsiveness to the external environment. Regenerative leadership is positioned as a future-facing frontier of sustainability-oriented leadership because it shifts the evaluative horizon from continuity and harm reduction toward restoration, net-positive value and intergenerational socio-ecological renewal; the paper does not assume that it is universally superior or automatically mechanism-distinct. Equifinality explains why several configurations may be viable, while bounded rationality, stakeholder interpretation and configuration mobility explain selection and adjustment over time. The Leadership Model Distinctiveness Test (LMDT) distinguishes mechanism novelty from contextual, goal, stakeholder/system-boundary and temporal extensions. Asian institutional heterogeneity is treated as a boundary condition rather than a single cultural moderator. The framework generates testable propositions and an empirical agenda for SMEs, family enterprises, start-ups and sustainability-to-regeneration transitions.

Keywords: leadership models; sustainable leadership; green leadership; sustainable entrepreneurship; Asia; configurational leadership

Introduction

Leadership research has accumulated a large portfolio of theories and branded models. Trait, behavioral, contingency, path-goal, leader-member exchange, charismatic, transformational, authentic, ethical, servant, inclusive, empowering, humble, shared, adaptive, digital and generative perspectives have each illuminated important aspects of influence. Yet the growth of labels has not been matched by equally strong adjudication of what is genuinely distinctive. Reviews and meta-analytic work increasingly show overlap among positive leadership measures and warn that broad style constructs can mix observable behavior, follower evaluation and proximal outcomes (Banks et al., 2018; Hoch et al., 2018; Fischer et al., 2024, 2026; Eva et al., 2025). The result is a field rich in vocabulary but less clear about which causal ingredients actually do the explanatory work.

Sustainability research adds a second layer of proliferation. Sustainable leadership emphasizes long-term resilience, stakeholder responsibility and continuity; responsible leadership extends the leader-follower relationship toward multiple stakeholders; environmentally specific and green transformational leadership redirect transformational processes toward pro-environmental behavior and green creativity; and regenerative leadership extends the ambition from sustaining viable systems toward

restoring and renewing social, ecological and organizational systems (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Maak & Pless, 2006; Robertson & Barling, 2013; Mittal & Dhar, 2016; Paul et al., 2025; Borland et al., 2026). In this paper, regenerative leadership is treated as a future-facing frontier rather than a universally superior successor to sustainable leadership. Its distinctive claim is potentially located in a broader system boundary, a longer intergenerational time horizon, and an explicit net-positive or restorative performance criterion. A recent systematic review of sustainable leadership similarly notes continuing variation in definitions, boundaries and metrics (Algharabli et al., 2026). The unanswered question is therefore not simply whether sustainability-oriented leadership matters, but what exactly is theoretically new when a sustainability or regeneration adjective is attached to leadership.

This question is especially consequential for enterprise in Asia because sustainability must be converted into entrepreneurial action, not merely endorsed as a leadership value. Sustainable entrepreneurship seeks economic and non-economic value while preserving natural and communal systems (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Yet founders and owner-managers must also act under uncertainty, mobilize scarce

resources, experiment with incomplete information and construct stakeholder support. Effectuation highlights control under uncertainty (Sarasvathy, 2001), entrepreneurial bricolage explains how resource-constrained ventures recombine means at hand (Baker & Nelson, 2005), and resource orchestration explains how managers structure, bundle and leverage resources (Sirmon et al., 2011). These processes make leadership mechanisms consequential for opportunity enactment, green innovation and venture scaling. Asian SMEs and entrepreneurial firms face them under heterogeneous conditions of family ownership, regulation, resource scarcity, digitalization and ecosystem support (Das et al., 2020; Bakhshi et al., 2023). Existing evidence spans ASEAN SMEs, Chinese high-technology firms, Indian energy-intensive organizations and Vietnamese manufacturing firms (Iqbal et al., 2020; Begum et al., 2022; Soni, 2023; Le & Gia, 2025) but typically begins with a selected leadership construct rather than comparing rival mechanisms on a common architecture.

The central premise of this paper is that there is no single best leadership model because there is no single leadership problem. Sustainable enterprise intensifies this premise. A founder leading a resource-constrained circular-economy start-up, a second-generation family manufacturer responding to environmental regulation, and a technology platform scaling across national institutions may all require different combinations of direction, stakeholder meaning, moral legitimacy, enablement and coordination. More than one combination may sometimes be viable. Moreover, leaders make these choices with incomplete information, employees and stakeholders interpret or resist their messages, and the context changes over time. The theoretical task is therefore not to identify a winning style but to model the models.

Accordingly, this paper adopts an integrative review and theory-building approach rather than an exhaustive effect-estimation review. The purpose is to compare heterogeneous leadership traditions at a common explanatory level and to develop a parsimonious conceptual framework for sustainable enterprise in Asia. Five questions organize the synthesis: RQ1, what recurring behaviors and causal mechanisms appear across major mainstream and sustainability-oriented leadership models? RQ2, where do sustainable, green, responsible, regenerative and related approaches remain theoretically distinctive after shared mechanisms are considered? RQ3, how do Asian institutional, ownership, resource and technological conditions shift the viability of alternative leadership configurations? RQ4, what do equifinality, bounded rationality, stakeholder interpretation and temporal change imply for leadership-model choice? RQ5, what empirical tests could validate, refine or falsify the proposed architecture in Asian SMEs, family enterprises, start-ups and sustainability transitions?

The paper makes one primary contribution: it develops a mechanism- and configuration-based way to adjudicate proliferating leadership models for sustainable entrepreneurial action in Asia. Three nested components operationalize that contribution. M²-LCC locates the relative demands placed on leadership across people, performance and external-environment responsiveness; the leadership mechanism architecture specifies the recurring influence processes through which configurations are enacted; and LMDT evaluates whether a named leadership model adds genuine theoretical value after shared content is controlled. Equifinality, bounded rationality, stakeholder interpretation and configuration mobility are explanatory principles within this architecture, not additional frameworks. The resulting question is not “Which leadership style should we adopt?” but “Which mechanism portfolio is viable for this sustainability or regeneration problem, in this enterprise context, for these stakeholders, and with what consequences?”

2. Methodology

2.1 Integrative review design and theory-building stance

The paper follows an integrative review logic designed for theory development across heterogeneous literatures rather than for estimating a single pooled effect. Integrative reviews are particularly useful when a field contains multiple theoretical traditions, inconsistent construct boundaries and diverse empirical designs because they permit comparison at a higher explanatory level (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Fan et al., 2022; Cronin & George, 2023). The unit of synthesis is therefore not an article count but the leadership model, mechanism, goal, stakeholder boundary or contextual condition that an article helps to clarify. The review seeks conceptual coverage and contrast, while avoiding claims of exhaustive database completeness.

Four evidence domains are brought into conversation. The first covers foundational and contemporary leadership-model scholarship, including construct-overlap and measurement critiques. The second covers sustainability-oriented leadership traditions such as sustainable, responsible, green, environmentally specific, stewardship and regenerative leadership. The third covers sustainable entrepreneurship and Asian enterprise research, particularly SMEs, family businesses, start-ups and green innovation. The fourth provides cross-cutting explanatory lenses—configuration theory, bounded rationality, power, institutions and technology—that help specify when a leadership mechanism is viable or ethically defensible. Bringing these domains together allows the review to preserve genuine theoretical differences while testing whether newer labels rely on recurring causal ingredients.

The analytic stance is deliberately open to disconfirmation. The eight mechanism families and

the three M²-LCC dimensions are used as sensitizing categories derived from prior leadership integration, behavior-taxonomy and configuration scholarship; they are not treated as self-validating constructs. During synthesis, a category is retained only when it improves explanatory clarity, and rival interpretations or negative cases are used to identify where mechanisms should be merged, bounded or treated as goal-, context- or time-specific extensions rather than independent styles.

2.2 Literature identification and review boundaries

Literature identification proceeded through scholarly web search, DOI resolution, citation chaining and relevant publisher/journal platforms, including ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Insight and Taylor & Francis Online. The final update was conducted on 18 September 2026. Search concepts covered leadership-model overlap and mechanisms; sustainable, green, responsible, stewardship and regenerative leadership; sustainable entrepreneurship, SMEs, family enterprise and green innovation; and Asian countries/institutional contexts. Representative query families are reported in Appendix A. Because the

objective is theoretical contrast rather than a publication census, the review does not claim exhaustive database coverage. Sources were retained when they materially informed construct definition, mechanism identification, model distinctiveness, entrepreneurial action or Asian boundary conditions. Auditability was strengthened through a two-pass selection logic and an explicit theory-building stopping rule. A lineage pass retained foundational theories, major reviews, meta-analyses and construct-critical studies needed to establish conceptual ancestry. A contrast pass then purposively retrieved sustainability-oriented and Asian enterprise studies capable of revealing overlap, counterexamples or boundary conditions. Retrieval continued until additional sources ceased to materially alter the provisional mechanism families, distinctiveness categories or Asian boundary conditions. This is a theoretical-saturation criterion rather than statistical saturation; accordingly, the paper makes no claims about prevalence, pooled effects or the complete population of leadership publications (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Fan et al., 2022; Cronin & George, 2023).

Table 1. Evidence domains, source-selection logic and theory-building stopping criteria for the integrative review.

Evidence domain	Identification and retention logic	Illustrative literature	Role / stopping cue
Leadership-model architecture	Lineage pass: foundational theories, major reviews, meta-analyses and construct-overlap critiques; retain when a source defines or materially challenges a model/mechanism.	Trait/behavioral, contingency, LMX, transformational, servant, ethical, authentic, shared, adaptive; construct-redundancy and causal critiques	Establish cross-model baseline; stop adding sources when no new mechanism or boundary distinction emerges.
Sustainability-oriented leadership	Targeted contrast across sustainable, green/environmentally specific transformational, responsible, stewardship and regenerative leadership; retain when sustainability changes mechanism, goal, stakeholder boundary, time horizon or configuration.	Avery & Bergsteiner; Maak & Pless; Robertson & Barling; Mittal & Dhar; Paul et al.; Algharabli et al.	Test mechanism novelty versus goal/context distinctiveness; retain counterexamples to redundancy.
Sustainable enterprise and entrepreneurship in Asia	Target Asian enterprise studies involving SMEs, family firms, start-ups, green innovation, sustainable performance or entrepreneurial action; code country/sector/ownership rather than treating Asia as one culture.	Iqbal et al.; Begum et al.; Soni; Ghag & Sonar; Le & Gia	Supply contextual boundaries; stop when added cases no longer change institutional, resource, ownership or technology conditions.

Evidence domain	Identification and retention logic	Illustrative literature	Role / stopping cue
Cross-cutting explanatory lenses	Retain theory that clarifies selection, fit, resource mobilization, uncertainty, power or adaptation.	Configuration/equifinality; bounded rationality; effectuation; bricolage; resource orchestration; institutions; power; algorithmic control	Connect leadership mechanisms to entrepreneurial enactment and dynamic reconfiguration; challenge framework when a rival lens explains the same process more parsimoniously.

Integrative Review and Theory-Building Process

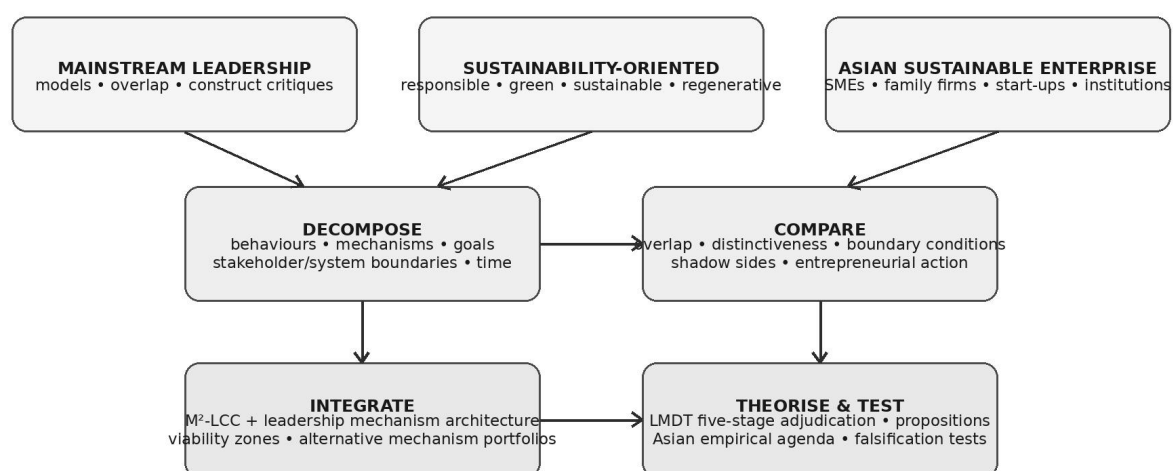


Figure 1. Integrative review and theory-building process used to develop Modelling the Models.

2.3 Source selection and analytic comparison

Source selection proceeded in two passes. The lineage pass retained works that materially defined, developed, compared or critiqued a leadership theory and major reviews needed to establish conceptual ancestry. The contrast pass purposively sampled sustainability-oriented and Asian enterprise studies that could expose overlap, negative cases or boundary conditions. In both passes, a source had to make the leadership process sufficiently visible to code at least one of the following: behavior, causal mechanism, focal goal, stakeholder boundary, temporality, contextual assumption, entrepreneurial action or shadow side. Purely practitioner labels, promotional frameworks without a scholarly lineage, and studies using leadership only as a background control were not treated as independent theoretical evidence.

The review uses purposive theoretical sampling rather than probabilistic representation. Foundational works are included because they define the theories against which later constructs claim novelty. Sustainability-oriented studies are included when they clarify whether environmental or social goals change the causal process, stakeholder boundary, time horizon or configuration. Asian studies are used to probe contextual boundaries involving regulation, ownership, resource constraints, sector, technology and institutional expectations. Because the purpose is theory integration, absence from the reviewed set should not be interpreted as evidence that a model or study does not exist.

The analytic framework separates leader-side behavior from causal mechanism, stakeholder interpretation and outcome. For example, “explains why a low-carbon transition is necessary” is a behavior; meaning/sense giving is the proposed mechanism; perceived meaningfulness or legitimacy is an interpretation; and green innovation is an outcome. This separation is crucial because sustainability-leadership research can otherwise confound a desirable environmental goal with the process through which leaders influence behavior. Each model is therefore compared on observable process, mechanism, focal goal, stakeholder boundary, level, temporality, contextual assumptions and likely shadow side.

2.4 Sensitizing mechanism codebook and synthesis procedure

The eight mechanism families were retained through explicit parsimony rules rather than label frequency. A candidate had to describe an influence process rather than an outcome, recur across traditions or clarify an important boundary, remain causally distinguishable from neighboring processes, and permit falsifiable implications. Overlaps were merged: vision/inspiration into meaning; support into relationship;

empowerment/coaching into enablement; goal clarification into direction; rewards into exchange; ethical/fairness processes into moral legitimation; distributed/boundary-spanning influence into collective coordination; and calibrated stretch/experimentation into developmental challenge. Outcomes such as trust, engagement and meaningfulness were excluded as mechanisms. Eight is therefore a provisional parsimonious solution that empirical work may merge, split or reject.

Table 2. Candidate leadership mechanism families used as sensitizing categories, not as eight new leadership styles.

Mechanism	Core causal function	Sustainable-enterprise illustration	Nearest conceptual boundary
Direction	Reduce ambiguity and coordinate effort	Set carbon, circularity, quality or growth priorities and decision rights	Not identical to control or authoritarianism
Exchange	Link contribution with valued returns and reciprocity	Align incentives/resources with green or social targets	Distinct from relationship quality
Meaning / sense giving	Make change and purpose interpretable and significant	Frame sustainability as strategic purpose rather than compliance	Employee/stakeholder meaning is the interpretation, not the mechanism
Relationship	Generate trust, support, belonging and relational assurance	Build credibility with employees, suppliers, communities and partners	Trust is an outcome/interpretation, not leader behavior
Moral legitimation	Make authority, choices and trade-offs normatively credible	Justify stakeholder sacrifices, fairness and ecological responsibility	Distinct from generic liking or charisma
Enablement	Increase agency, capability, voice and usable discretion	Resource green experimentation and employee-led sustainability innovation	Autonomy without resources may become abandonment
Collective coordination	Align interdependent actors and distributed expertise	Coordinate supply-chain, ecosystem and cross-functional sustainability work	More than individual empowerment
Developmental challenge	Build capability through calibrated difficulty and learning	Use bounded pilots, stretch assignments and recoverable experimentation	Requires bounded risk; not neglect or avoidable harm

Table 3. Source-to-mechanism traceability used to challenge and refine the eight sensitizing categories.

Mechanism	Representative traditions / evidence	Illustrative theoretical anchors	Distinctiveness question
Direction	Behavioral, path-goal, transactional and transformational leadership	House (1971); Burns (1978); Dinh et al. (2014)	Does the construct add more than priority clarification, coordination and decision rights?
Exchange	Transactional and ethical leadership	Burns (1978); Brown et al. (2005)	Is reciprocity/reinforcement distinct from relationship quality or moral legitimacy?
Meaning / sense giving	Charismatic/transformational and green transformational leadership	Burns (1978); Robertson & Barling (2013); Begum et al. (2022)	Is a new label adding a causal meaning process or primarily a new outcome domain?
Relationship	LMX, servant, inclusive and humble leadership	Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995); Nembhard & Edmondson (2006); Eva et al. (2019)	Can relational assurance be separated from trust as an interpretation/outcome?
Moral legitimation	Ethical, responsible, sustainable and regenerative leadership	Brown et al. (2005); Maak & Pless (2006); Avery & Bergsteiner (2011); Paul et al. (2025)	Does normative credibility introduce a distinct mechanism or a stakeholder/goal boundary?

Mechanism	Representative traditions / evidence	Illustrative theoretical anchors	Distinctiveness question
Enablement	Servant, inclusive, empowering and green transformational leadership	Nembhard & Edmondson (2006); Eva et al. (2019); Begum et al. (2022)	Is agency supported by capability/resources, or merely delegated as responsibility?
Collective coordination	Shared/distributed, responsible and sustainable leadership	Dinh et al. (2014); Maak & Pless (2006); Avery & Bergsteiner (2011)	Does the theory explain interdependence beyond individual empowerment?
Developmental challenge	Adaptive/generative, humble and learning-oriented leadership	Owens & Hekman (2012); Dinh et al. (2014); Paul et al. (2025)	Is calibrated challenge separable from enablement and direction, and under what risk boundary?

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 From proliferating leadership labels to recurring mechanisms

The integrative synthesis juxtaposes foundational leadership theories, recent construct-critical scholarship, reviews of sustainability-oriented leadership, and illustrative evidence from Asian enterprise settings. The literature is too heterogeneous to justify collapsing all leadership models into one construct, yet the comparison repeatedly reveals familiar causal ingredients beneath different labels. This pattern motivates a mechanism-level rather than label-level unit of analysis.

Four findings organize the synthesis. First, established leadership traditions remain meaningfully different in focal level, goals and causal emphasis. Second, many later styles combine recurring mechanisms into differently weighted bundles. Third, sustainability-oriented models often add important environmental, stakeholder or temporal content without necessarily adding a wholly new causal process. Fourth, Asian institutional and enterprise conditions can shift which mechanism combinations are feasible, credible and ethically defensible. These findings provide the basis for M²-LCC, the leadership mechanism architecture and LMDT.

The leadership literature contains genuine theoretical discontinuities. Trait theories focus on attributes; behavioral approaches on actions; contingency and path-goal theories on fit; leader-member exchange on differentiated dyadic relationships; transformational and charismatic theories on meaning and identification; servant, ethical and authentic leadership on human-centered and normative influence; shared and distributed leadership on the locus of influence; and adaptive or generative approaches on learning and emergence. These differences should not be erased (Fiedler, 1967; House, 1971; Burns, 1978; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Brown et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Dinh et al., 2014).

However, many later models are multidimensional bundles. Transformational leadership combines direction, meaning, relationship and enablement; servant leadership combines relationship, moral legitimation and enablement; inclusive and humble leadership both contain relational accessibility and

voice-enabling behavior; engaging leadership combines strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring. Shared variance across measures can therefore reflect overlapping causal ingredients as well as measurement problems (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Eva et al., 2019; Schaufeli, 2021; Fischer et al., 2024; Eva et al., 2025).

Mechanism decomposition changes the unit of comparison. Instead of asking whether green transformational leadership is better than servant leadership, the review asks which functions each model activates, for whom, toward what goal, under what boundary conditions and at what cost. This retains meaningful differences while preventing a new adjective from being treated as sufficient proof of a new theory.

Proposition 1. After shared behaviors and mechanisms are modelled, the incremental explanatory value of a named leadership style will decline as its behavioral and mechanism overlap with neighboring styles increases; models can remain theoretically distinct through consequential differences in goals, stakeholder boundaries, level, temporal process or context.

3.2 Sustainability-oriented leadership: new mechanisms or new goals?

Sustainability-oriented leadership is especially useful for testing construct distinctiveness because its labels often embed the desired outcome in the construct name. Prior reviews already show substantial activity around sustainable, transformational, responsible and environmentally oriented leadership, while also reporting inconsistent terminology, overlapping constructs and uneven empirical evidence (Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023; Ribeiro & Leitão, 2024; Algharabli et al., 2026). Sustainable leadership is generally associated with long-term resilience, stakeholder responsibility and continuity (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). Responsible leadership expands the focal relationship beyond leader-subordinate dyads to multiple stakeholders and foregrounds moral complexity (Maak & Pless, 2006). Environmentally specific and green transformational leadership redirect transformational processes toward pro-environmental behavior, green creativity and green innovation (Mittal & Dhar, 2016; Begum et al., 2022;

Huang et al., 2023; Soni, 2023). Regenerative leadership goes further by shifting the goal from maintaining systems toward ecological and social renewal (Paul et al., 2025; Borland et al., 2026).

These traditions are not necessarily redundant. Responsible leadership changes the stakeholder boundary; sustainable leadership changes the joint performance criterion and time horizon by treating resilience and balanced economic-social-environmental continuity as constitutive outcomes; regenerative leadership potentially changes the system boundary and goal by seeking restoration and net-positive value across generations. Sustainable leadership is therefore not reduced to generic responsibility: its claim is simultaneous enterprise viability and preservation of the human, social and ecological foundations of future value creation. Yet these streams often invoke familiar mechanisms—meaning, moral legitimation, relationship, enablement, learning and coordination. Distinctiveness may therefore lie in goals, stakeholders, system boundaries and time horizons rather than in wholly new causal processes.

3.2.1 Regenerative leadership as a future-facing frontier

A useful way to distinguish the sustainability family is to compare its evaluative scope. Conventional performance-oriented leadership asks whether the enterprise is effective; responsible leadership broadens whose interests count; sustainable leadership asks whether value creation can continue without eroding the human, social and ecological foundations on which the enterprise depends; regenerative leadership asks whether leadership can help renew those foundations and leave the wider system with greater capacity to thrive. The shorthand effectiveness → responsibility → sustainability → regeneration therefore denotes an expansion of evaluative scope, not an evolutionary ladder, maturity hierarchy or universal ranking of leadership models. A narrower model can remain more viable in a particular context, while a regenerative ambition is defensible only when restoration is materially relevant and feasible.

For Modelling the Models, the issue is whether regenerative ambition introduces a new causal mechanism or reconfigures established mechanisms around a broader system boundary and restorative criterion. Regenerative scholarship emphasizes reframing, interdependence, renewal, ecosystem coordination and long-horizon development (Paul et al., 2025; Borland et al., 2026), which map plausibly onto meaning, moral legitimation, collective coordination, enablement and developmental challenge. LMDT therefore requires incremental value through a unique mechanism, consequential configuration, system boundary, temporal logic or restorative criterion. Claimed “net-positive” impact is not demonstrated regeneration: evidence should establish a baseline, show material renewal, identify who bears transition costs and rule out displacement

of harm.

This framing is especially relevant for Asian enterprise. Regenerative challenges frequently exceed firm boundaries: circular supply chains, ecosystem restoration, community resilience, climate adaptation and intergenerational family-enterprise stewardship require coordination among employees, suppliers, communities, regulators, financiers and natural systems. The research question is thus not whether Asian firms should simply “adopt regenerative leadership,” but under which institutional and resource conditions restorative leadership ambitions can be translated into viable entrepreneurial action without displacing costs onto weaker stakeholders.

This distinction is particularly important for green transformational leadership. Studies in China, India and Vietnam connect green or environmentally specific transformational leadership with green thinking, creative process engagement, green self-concept, perceived corporate social responsibility, green innovation and sustainable corporate performance (Begum et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023; Soni, 2023; Le & Gia, 2025). These findings demonstrate consequential domain-specific effects, but they do not by themselves establish a new causal mechanism. If inspirational framing, identification, intellectual stimulation and empowerment operate through meaning, relationship and enablement in both green and non-green domains, then the environmental distinctiveness is primarily goal-, stakeholder- or context-specific. The Leadership Model Distinctiveness Test (LMDT) therefore asks whether a sustainability-oriented label adds a distinct mechanism, a consequential configuration, a different stakeholder boundary, a different time horizon or incremental explanatory value after common content is controlled.

Proposition 2. Sustainability-oriented leadership models will show greater theoretical distinctiveness when they introduce a new causal mechanism, stakeholder or system boundary, temporal logic, or restorative performance criterion; when they primarily redirect established mechanisms toward environmental or social outcomes, their contribution will be configurational or goal-specific rather than mechanism-distinct.

3.2.2 Leadership Model Distinctiveness Test (LMDT): a five-stage adjudication protocol

LMDT converts construct-distinctiveness critique into a five-stage test. Stage 1—mechanism novelty: is there a causal process not already represented by neighboring models? Stage 2—configuration novelty: if mechanisms are shared, is their causal combination consequentially different? Stage 3—boundary novelty: does the model change whose interests or which social-ecological system is constitutive of effectiveness? Stage 4—temporal/process novelty: does it introduce a different horizon, feedback dynamic or process of change? Stage 5—incremental explanatory value: after shared content is controlled, does the model improve explanation, prediction or

actionable diagnosis? A model can therefore be valuable without passing Stage 1, but a label that changes only terminology or outcome wording should be treated as an application rather than an independent causal theory. LMDT is an adjudication protocol, not a scoring scale.

Proposition 3. Regenerative leadership will

demonstrate incremental theoretical distinctiveness over sustainable and responsible leadership only when restorative or net-positive system outcomes require a consequential mechanism configuration, system boundary or temporal logic not adequately captured by those neighboring constructs.

Table 4. Illustrative mechanism-based comparison of mainstream and sustainability-oriented leadership traditions

Leadership tradition	Primary emphasis	Dominant mechanisms	Sustainability-specific contribution	Likely distinctiveness status
Transformational	Purpose, change, identification	Meaning; relationship; enablement; direction	Can orient transformation toward sustainability	Mechanism bundle; broad established theory
Servant	Follower growth and service	Relationship; moral legitimation; enablement	Human and stakeholder stewardship	Distinct configuration/goal emphasis
Ethical	Normative conduct and reinforcement	Moral legitimation; exchange; direction	Ethical boundary on sustainability trade-offs	Normative mechanism emphasis
Responsible	Multi-stakeholder responsibility	Moral legitimation; relationship; collective coordination	Expands stakeholder boundary beyond followers	Stakeholder-boundary distinctiveness
Sustainable	Long-term resilience and balanced value	Meaning; coordination; relationship; moral legitimation	Long-term economic-social-environmental continuity	Goal/time-horizon configuration
Green / environmentally specific transformational	Environmental purpose and behavior	Meaning; enablement; relationship	Targets pro-environmental passion, behavior and green creativity	Context/goal-specific configuration
Adaptive / generative	Learning under complexity	Meaning; enablement; coordination; developmental challenge	Useful for uncertain sustainability transitions	Temporal/process distinctiveness
Regenerative	Net-positive renewal/restoration of social, ecological and organizational systems	Meaning; moral legitimation; collective coordination; enablement; developmental challenge	Moves beyond continuity and harm reduction toward restoration, reciprocity, resilience and intergenerational system renewal	Potential goal/system-boundary/time-horizon distinctiveness; mechanism novelty remains to be demonstrated

3.3 M²-LCC: leadership viability zones for sustainable enterprise

The integrative synthesis is organized through three recurring demand orientations: concern for people, concern for performance and responsiveness to the external environment. These are meta-demands and configuration coordinates used to locate the problem space; they are not assumed to be reflective latent traits or three ready-made survey scales. People concern includes dignity, capability, voice, inclusion, well-being and relationship quality. Performance concern includes execution, accountability, productivity, innovation and economic viability. External-environment responsiveness includes sensitivity and adaptation to ecological limits, market turbulence, technology, regulation, institutions and stakeholder expectations. The latter is deliberately broader than

environmental sustainability alone.

M²-LCC is a meta-configuration space, not an enlarged Managerial Grid and not a psychometric scale. It does not assume that maximal values on all three dimensions are universally desirable. High-performance pressure may improve short-term output while degrading well-being or suppressing voice; strong people concern without discipline can weaken execution; internal people-performance alignment without environmental responsiveness can create strategic obsolescence; constant external adaptation can create change fatigue. Sustainable enterprise therefore requires viable configuration rather than maximum scores.

Equifinality gives the cube its non-universal logic. Configuration theory shows that different internally coherent arrangements can sometimes produce similar effectiveness (Meyer et al., 1993; Gresov & Drazin, 1997; Fiss, 2007). Consider two plausible green-innovation recipes. Where employees possess technical capability and discretionary space, strong meaning, enablement and external responsiveness may support rapid local experimentation. Where sustainability work is highly interdependent or regulation is salient, moral legitimation, collective coordination and disciplined performance routines may provide an alternative route. The recipes need not contain the same ingredients, and neither is universally superior. A configuration can therefore be sufficient without being necessary, while conditions associated with outcome presence need not be mirror images of those associated with absence.

Proposition 4. Comparable sustainable-enterprise outcomes can arise through distinct mechanism configurations: meaning-enablement configurations should be especially viable when local experimentation and discretion are feasible, whereas moral-legitimation-collective-coordination configurations should be especially viable when stakeholder interdependence and regulatory salience are high.

Proposition 5. The configuration associated with a favorable sustainable-enterprise outcome need not be the inverse of the configuration associated with its absence; causal asymmetry should therefore be expected in configurational tests.



Figure 2. Modelling the Models for sustainable enterprise in Asia: complementary viability conditions, configuration space, mechanism portfolio, enactment, outcomes and feedback.

3.4 Why Asia changes the viability question

Asia should not be treated as one cultural moderator. The region spans advanced and emerging economies, state-linked sectors, family-dominated systems and

digital ecosystems, consistent with institutional accounts of heterogeneous emerging-economy entrepreneurship (Bruton et al., 2008). The illustrative evidence used here is concentrated in

selected contexts—especially China, India, ASEAN economies, Pakistan and Vietnam—and is not comprehensive regional coverage. Its purpose is boundary probing: to examine how institutions, ownership, resources, sector and technology alter mechanism viability. The framework therefore requires extension in underrepresented Asian contexts before region-wide generalization.

Four boundary conditions are especially important. Institutional and regulatory conditions shape the urgency and legitimacy of sustainability action; ownership and governance influence time horizons and stakeholder priorities; resource constraints can make high-involvement practices difficult for SMEs and start-ups; and digitalization can shift the locus of control when algorithms allocate work or constrain discretion (Kellogg et al., 2020). Indian SME evidence illustrates competitiveness-sustainability trade-offs (Ghag & Sonar, 2024), while ASEAN evidence links sustainable leadership with performance through learning and empowerment (Iqbal et al., 2020). Digitalization is treated as a viability boundary condition, not as grounds for another standalone leadership framework.

Family enterprises require an additional ownership-and-time-horizon lens. Stewardship theory explains willingness to accept near-term sacrifice for collective long-run interests (Davis et al., 1997), while socioemotional wealth highlights family control, identity and continuity as nonfinancial reference points shaping strategic choice (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Transgenerational entrepreneurship shifts attention from survival to renewed entrepreneurial value across generations (Zellweger et al., 2012). In Pakistani family SMEs, governance and owner-family identity have been linked to transgenerational sustainability through family social capital (Ahmad, 2025). These forces can support stewardship and regeneration but also intensify insularity or protection of family interests.

These boundary conditions shift leadership viability zones rather than adding more axes to M²-LCC. Resource slack, capability support and ecosystem support are complementary viability conditions, especially for SMEs and start-ups. Empowerment may be experienced as trust where resources and capability are adequate but as abandonment where support is low; direction may be legitimate in a safety-critical transition but experienced as domination where autonomy is expected. The same nominal model can therefore produce different experienced leadership across Asian contexts.

Power is also cross-cutting. Direction can become domination; exchange can become dependency; meaning can become manipulation or greenwashing; relationship can become favoritism; moral legitimation can delegitimize dissent; enablement can become responsabilization; coordination can suppress minority voices; developmental challenge can become neglect. Sustainable leadership cannot be evaluated only by performance or even environmental outcomes.

Ethical legitimacy, employee well-being and the distribution of costs and benefits must remain visible (Fleming & Spicer, 2014).

Proposition 6. The sustainability effectiveness of a leadership-mechanism configuration will vary with enterprise resource availability, ownership structure, institutional support and technological conditions; configurations relying heavily on enablement and developmental challenge will be less viable under severe resource constraints unless complementary capability, slack or ecosystem support is available.

Proposition 7. A leadership configuration that improves economic or environmental performance will not necessarily be ethically or socially desirable; sustainable-enterprise evaluation therefore requires simultaneous attention to performance, environmental outcomes, employee well-being, voice and stakeholder legitimacy.

3.5 Leadership mechanisms and sustainable entrepreneurial action

Entrepreneurship is not merely an application setting for the framework; it is the action process through which leadership configurations become enterprise outcomes. Sustainable entrepreneurial action requires actors to notice or construct opportunities, mobilize stakeholders, assemble resources, run experiments and scale viable solutions while balancing economic, social and ecological consequences. These activities are especially consequential in SMEs and start-ups because formal systems are thinner and leadership behavior is more directly coupled with resource allocation and venture choices.

The entrepreneurship literature supplies micro foundations for this conversion process. Effectuation emphasizes acting through means under control rather than relying only on prediction (Sarasvathy, 2001); bricolage explains how resource-constrained entrepreneurs recombine what is at hand (Baker & Nelson, 2005); and resource orchestration focuses attention on structuring, bundling and leveraging resources through managerial action (Sirmon et al., 2011). The leadership mechanism architecture links these processes to leadership influence: direction narrows priorities, meaning builds commitment, enablement creates usable discretion, developmental challenge supports recoverable experimentation, collective coordination mobilizes ecosystem partners, and moral legitimation sustains stakeholder support for contested sustainability trade-offs.

The resulting theoretical bridge is sustainability or regeneration problem/opportunity → entrepreneurial diagnosis → leadership-mechanism configuration → entrepreneurial enactment (opportunity mobilization, experimentation and resource orchestration) → green/social innovation, resilience or sustainable performance → stakeholder feedback and reconfiguration. This bridge clarifies where entrepreneurship enters Modelling the Models. A leadership label does not create entrepreneurial value by itself; value depends on whether its mechanism portfolio enables the venture to act under its actual

resource, institutional and stakeholder conditions.

Proposition 8. Sustainable entrepreneurial action mediates the translation of a viable leadership-mechanism configuration into sustainable-enterprise outcomes; this translation will be stronger when entrepreneurs can mobilize, recombine and orchestrate the resources and stakeholder support required to enact the configuration.

3.6 Bounded rationality, communication and configuration mobility

Equifinality creates a decision problem: if several configurations may work, leaders cannot simply identify the one optimal model. Simon's (1955) bounded-rationality logic provides a decision-theory layer. Entrepreneurs and managers rarely know every stakeholder preference, ecological consequence, market reaction or institutional change. They satisfy by selecting a plausible course of action given limited information and then updating it as evidence emerges. Communication and stakeholder interpretation are therefore part of the mechanism rather than an afterthought. A founder may intend empowerment, but employees may experience unsupported delegation; a sustainability narrative may be intended as purpose but interpreted as greenwashing; a performance standard may be intended as discipline but experienced as unfair risk transfer. Employees, suppliers, investors and community actors are not passive receivers. Their voice, resistance and feedback reveal misfit and can change subsequent managerial diagnosis.

Leadership configuration mobility denotes the capacity to alter the mechanism portfolio and relative emphasis on people, performance and environment as conditions change. Mobility is not perpetual change. Too little movement creates rigidity; too much produces signal inconsistency, initiative fatigue and loss of trust. Sustainable enterprise therefore depends on an iterative process of diagnosis, enactment, feedback and responsible reconfiguration rather than permanent commitment to one leadership identity.

Proposition 9. Under uncertainty, leadership configurations that generate credible stakeholder feedback and permit responsible reconfiguration will be more robust than rigid commitment to a single named model, because feedback improves bounded diagnosis over time.

Proposition 10. Leadership outcomes will deteriorate when the rate or direction of configuration change is misaligned with changes in people, performance or environmental demands; both rigidity and excessive reconfiguration can create misfit.

3.7 Future empirical agenda for sustainable enterprise in Asia

The framework invites empirical tests that are more discriminating than another cross-sectional comparison of leadership style scores. First, construct research should test whether the eight mechanism families are behaviorally separable without

immediately creating eight new employee-rated scales. Behavioral coding, multi-source designs, CFA/ESEM and multitrait-multimethod studies can assess whether some mechanisms collapse or whether existing style measures already capture them. Second, configurational research should directly test equifinality and causal asymmetry. Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis, latent-profile analysis and factorial experiments can examine whether different mechanism portfolios are sufficient for green innovation, venture resilience, employee well-being or stakeholder legitimacy. These methods are especially appropriate where SMEs and family firms achieve similar outcomes through different resource and governance pathways.

Third, future work should exploit Asia's institutional heterogeneity rather than use country as a cosmetic control. Comparative designs across India, China, Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asia and West Asian enterprise contexts can test whether regulation, family ownership, labor-market institutions, ecosystem maturity, AI adoption and digital infrastructure shift the configuration required for sustainability outcomes. Existing studies already point to different mechanism chains across ASEAN SMEs, Chinese high-technology firms, Indian energy-intensive organizations and Vietnamese manufacturing firms (Iqbal et al., 2020; Begum et al., 2022; Soni, 2023; Le & Gia, 2025), but these studies rarely compare rival leadership models on a common mechanism architecture. Within-country studies are equally important because regional and sectoral variation can exceed national averages.

Fourth, sustainability leadership research should test theory pruning directly, with regenerative leadership as a future-facing case. Green transformational, environmentally specific transformational, sustainable, responsible and regenerative leadership should be compared after common behaviors and mechanisms are modelled. Reviews already identify terminological ambiguity (Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023; Ribeiro & Leitão, 2024; Algharabli et al., 2026). Regenerative leadership adds a sharper claim—restoration and net-positive system capacity—so research should test whether its incremental value lies in a unique mechanism, configuration, system boundary, time horizon or restorative outcome criterion rather than assume theoretical independence.

Fifth, longitudinal research should examine configuration mobility during sustainability transitions. Suitable settings include family-business succession, decarbonization programmes, digital-green transformation, supply-chain shocks and the scaling of circular or social ventures. Event-based and experience-sampling designs can show when leaders detect misfit, what feedback they trust, and how rapidly reconfiguration improves or damages outcomes.

Table 5. Asia-focused empirical agenda for testing, refining or falsifying Modelling the Models.

Research stream	Illustrative Asian question	Preferred design	Evidence that would challenge the framework
Mechanism validation	Do the eight mechanisms remain separable across sectors and countries?	Behavioral coding; CFA/ESEM; MTMM	Mechanisms collapse or add no explanatory value
Equifinality	Can different portfolios produce similar green innovation or resilience?	fsQCA; latent profiles; experiments	One configuration consistently dominates
Institutional boundaries	Do regulation, labor institutions or family ownership shift viability zones?	Cross-country/cross-sector multilevel studies	Configurations are invariant across contexts
SME resource constraints	When does enablement require complementary resources to avoid abandonment?	Matched owner-manager/employee studies; field experiments	Resources do not condition interpretation or outcomes
Theory pruning	Do green/sustainable labels add value beyond shared mechanisms?	Comparative construct validation; incremental validity	New labels consistently explain unique variance through distinct mechanisms
Configuration mobility	How do leaders reconfigure during digital-green or succession transitions?	Longitudinal event/sequence studies	Stable models outperform adaptive reconfiguration across change events
Regenerative leadership frontier	Does regenerative leadership add mechanisms beyond sustainable/responsible leadership, or primarily broaden system boundaries and time horizons toward restoration and net-positive value?	Comparative construct validation; longitudinal ecosystem studies; multi-stakeholder case comparisons; fsQCA	No incremental mechanism, configuration or system-level outcome beyond sustainable/responsible leadership

4. Conclusion and Implications

4.1 Theoretical implications

This review starts from a simple observation with demanding consequences: sustainable enterprise in Asia is unlikely to be explained by one universally superior leadership model. Leadership theory has proliferated, and sustainability scholarship has added further model labels. The appropriate response is neither to collapse every theory into one generic construct nor to grant every new adjective independent theoretical status. The more useful task is to identify what leaders do, through which mechanisms, toward which goals, for which stakeholders and under which conditions.

Modelling the Models centers on one contribution: adjudicating leadership-model proliferation through mechanisms and configurations for sustainable entrepreneurial action. M²-LCC locates the people, performance and external-environment demands of the problem; the leadership mechanism architecture specifies recurring influence processes; and LMDT applies five tests—mechanism, configuration, boundary, temporal/process and incremental explanatory value—to determine what a named model adds. Equifinality, bounded rationality, stakeholder interpretation, power and configuration

mobility remain explanatory principles rather than additional frameworks.

For sustainability-oriented leadership, the implication is precise. Sustainable, responsible, green and regenerative leadership can all be useful without all constituting independent causal theories. Responsible leadership may be distinctive in stakeholder boundary; green transformational leadership in outcome domain; sustainable leadership in resilience and longer-term balanced value; and regenerative leadership in restorative goals, socio-ecological system boundaries and intergenerational horizons. Regeneration is a future-facing frontier, not a universally superior model, and its strongest claim depends on evidence that restoration requires a configuration or process not adequately explained by neighboring constructs.

4.2 Implications for entrepreneurs, SMEs and family enterprises

The framework recommends a problem-first rather than style-first approach. Entrepreneurs and managers should begin by diagnosing the sustainability or regeneration challenge: Is the problem unclear strategic direction, weak stakeholder legitimacy, low employee capability, coordination failure across a supply chain, insufficient

experimentation, or degradation of the wider social-ecological system on which the enterprise depends? They can then assemble a plausible mechanism portfolio rather than attempting to 'be' transformational, servant, green or regenerative in every situation. Regenerative ambition is appropriate only where the enterprise has a credible pathway to restoration or net-positive system value and the resources, partnerships and governance needed to pursue it responsibly.

For resource-constrained SMEs, this diagnosis is particularly important. Sustainability practices compete for scarce managerial attention and capital. Leaders may need to combine clear performance discipline with enablement and meaning rather than pursue high-intensity participation everywhere. Family firms may use stewardship and long-term

orientation as strengths but should guard against relational favoritism or resistance to external challenge. Start-ups may excel at adaptability yet risk change fatigue and weak coordination as they scale. In each case, the configuration should be evaluated against economic viability, environmental performance, social value and human consequences together.

Policymakers and ecosystem actors can also use the framework. Training programmes for Asian SMEs should move beyond one branded leadership model and instead build diagnostic capability, stakeholder communication, experimentation discipline and cross-boundary coordination. Sustainability incentives are more likely to translate into enterprise outcomes when leaders have the mechanisms and resources to interpret, enact and adapt them locally.

Table 6. Problem-first diagnostic matrix for sustainable enterprise leadership.

Sustainability challenge	Mechanism / M²-LCC emphasis	Possible shadow side	Evidence to monitor	Reconfiguration trigger
Ambiguous sustainability direction	Direction + meaning; stronger external responsiveness	Coercive mission or greenwashing	Goal comprehension, strategic alignment, stakeholder credibility	Persistent confusion or credibility gap
Weak capability for green change	Enablement + developmental challenge + relationship	Abandonment, overload or unsafe experimentation	Skills, voice, error recovery, well-being	Repeated errors, overload or low learning
Supply-chain coordination failure	Collective coordination + moral legitimation + direction	Voice suppression or cost shifting to weaker partners	Partner participation, delivery/emissions, grievance signals	Partner exit, resistance or concentrated burden
Resource-constrained green innovation	Meaning + enablement + disciplined performance; selective bricolage	Innovation theatre, burnout or cash depletion	Experiment quality, learning, cash runway, employee strain	No learning, financial stress or symbolic-only innovation
Family-enterprise transition	Relationship + moral legitimation + external responsiveness	Favoritism, insularity or status-quo lock-in	Non-family voice, succession readiness, stakeholder trust	Suppressed dissent or strategic inertia
Regenerative net-positive ambition	Meaning + moral legitimation + collective coordination; stronger external responsiveness	Regenerative-washing, burden shifting, ecological rebound or symbolic restoration	Baseline and counterfactual ecological/social indicators; stakeholder distribution of gains/costs; independent evidence of restoration	No material renewal, displaced harm, weak additionality or stakeholder contestation of the net-positive claim

4.3 Limitations

An integrative review trades exhaustive database coverage for theoretical breadth and synthesis. The literature assembled here is therefore illustrative of the major theoretical traditions and boundary conditions needed to build the framework rather than a census of every leadership publication. Terminology,

English-language availability, publisher access and the visibility of well-cited models may shape which sources are most accessible. The paper consequently avoids claims about prevalence, effect-size superiority or the complete population of leadership constructs. A second limitation is the use of pre-specified mechanism families. Sensitizing categories can create

confirmation bias, which is why the framework explicitly allows mechanisms to be merged, bounded or rejected and treats negative cases as theoretically informative. A third limitation is that “Asia” remains analytically broad; the framework therefore treats institutions, ownership, resources, sector, technology and ecological pressures as boundary conditions and should be tested within as well as across countries. Finally, M²-LCC, the leadership mechanism architecture and LMDT are conceptual outputs requiring empirical validation. They should not be converted prematurely into numerical scoring tools or another set of leadership-style scales.

4.4 Conclusion

The future of leadership theory for sustainable enterprise may lie less in finding the next best model than in learning how to model the models—and, increasingly, how leadership can move from sustaining viable systems toward regenerating depleted ones. Sustainable enterprise in Asia requires leaders to balance people, performance and external demands under uncertainty, resource constraints and institutional diversity. Different mechanism portfolios may sometimes reach comparable outcomes, and the same portfolio may fail when its context changes. Regenerative leadership sharpens the frontier by asking whether enterprise leadership can restore social-ecological capacity, create net-positive value and extend responsibility across generations; yet these ambitions must still be subjected to the same tests of mechanism distinctiveness, contextual viability, stakeholder interpretation and ethical distribution. The practical and scholarly question therefore becomes: which mechanisms are needed for this sustainability or regeneration problem, which alternative configurations are viable, whose interests do they serve, how will stakeholders interpret them, and what evidence would justify reconfiguration? There is no single best leadership model because there is no single leadership problem—and because sustainable and regenerative enterprise are moving, multi-stakeholder targets.

Declarations

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Data availability: No primary data were generated or analyzed. The conceptual synthesis is based on published sources identified in the reference list; the mechanism definitions and theoretical comparison logic are reported in the manuscript tables and figures.

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Appendix A. Review identification protocol and audit trail

Final update: 18 September 2026. The non-exhaustive integrative-review protocol combined scholarly web search, DOI resolution, citation chaining and targeted publisher/journal searches. Its purpose is conceptual contrast, not prevalence estimation.

Representative query families combined: (a) “leadership theory/model” with overlap, redundancy, mechanism or configuration; (b) sustainable, responsible, green, environmentally specific transformational and regenerative leadership with mechanism, stakeholder or distinctiveness; and (c) those terms with SME, entrepreneur, family business, green innovation and named Asian contexts.

Selection audit: a lineage pass retained foundational theories, major reviews and construct-critical work; a contrast pass retained sustainability-oriented and Asian enterprise studies that exposed overlap, counterexamples or boundary conditions. Retrieval stopped when added sources no longer materially changed mechanism families, distinctiveness categories or contextual boundaries. The protocol supports transparency, not exhaustive-coverage claims.

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