LEADERSHIP STYLES THAT PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY

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Abstract. *Environmental sustainability has become an imperative for the tourism and hospitality industry, which is heavily reliant on natural resources and sensitive ecosystems. Leadership plays a pivotal role in embedding sustainability into organizational culture and operational practices within these sectors. This article reviews key leadership styles that promote environmental sustainability, with a focus on transformational, servant, and ethical leadership, and discusses their impact on sustainable tourism and hospitality management.*

Transformational Leadership in Sustainability

Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiring and motivating employees to exceed expectations and embrace visionary goals, is widely recognized for driving environmental responsibility in tourism and hospitality. Transformational leaders foster innovation and encourage employees to engage in environmentally sustainable behaviors, such as resource conservation and waste reduction. Research demonstrates that this leadership style enhances employees' green performance—including creativity, engagement, and citizenship behaviors directed towards environmental stewardship (Mittal and Dhar, 2016; Farooq et al., 2022). By setting a compelling green vision, transformational leaders mobilize teams to implement sustainability initiatives that align with long-term ecological preservation. Environmental sustainability in tourism and hospitality has emerged as a critical focus area due to the industry's significant impact on natural resources, ecosystems, and local communities. The escalating concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion call for an urgent transformation in how tourism businesses operate. Leadership within these sectors is pivotal to driving this transformation, as leaders shape organizational culture, influence stakeholder collaboration, and set strategic directions that prioritize sustainability. Leadership styles that emphasize collaboration, ethical behavior, and shared vision have shown particular promise in promoting sustainable outcomes. This article explores transformational, servant, and ethical leadership styles, analyzing how each facilitates environmental stewardship in tourism and hospitality contexts.

Servant Leadership and Environmental Stewardship

Servant leadership emphasizes the leader's role as a steward who serves the needs of employees, communities, and the environment. Environmentally specific servant leadership is particularly influential in tourism and hospitality, as it cultivates a culture prioritizing ecological responsibility alongside organizational goals (Luu, 2019; Tuan, 2020). This leadership style promotes pro-environmental organizational citizenship behaviors, encouraging voluntary sustainable practices by employees. Empirical studies suggest that servant leaders foster green psychological capital among employees, building their capacity for sustained engagement in sustainability efforts (Abdou et al., 2025). By centering service and care, servant leaders align business operations with the well-being of both society and the environment. Tourism accounts for approximately 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions and exerts pressure on ecosystems worldwide

(UNWTO, 2019). Hospitality services consume vast amounts of energy and water, generate waste, and contribute to pollution. Unsustainable practices can degrade destinations, threatening the economic viability of the tourism sector itself. **Overview of Leadership Styles Relevant to Sustainability**

- **Transformational Leadership** inspires change by creating a compelling vision of the future and motivating collective action. It encourages innovation and empowers employees to engage in sustainable practices.
- **Servant Leadership** focuses on serving the needs of others—including the environment—and builds green organizational citizenship behaviors by fostering care and stewardship.
- **Ethical Leadership** ensures decisions and policies adhere to moral standards, promoting transparency, accountability, and social responsibility critical for genuine sustainability initiatives.

By adopting these leadership approaches, tourism and hospitality managers can embed sustainability into the core of their business operations and culture. Transformational leaders stimulate employees to transcend self-interest for the sake of ecological goals. They model environmentally friendly behaviors and communicate a strong sustainability vision. Research indicates that transformational leadership correlates positively with employee environmental engagement, innovative green solutions, and sustainability-oriented organizational change (Mittal & Dhar, 2016).

Examples include hotel managers championing energy efficiency programs and waste reduction initiatives, persuading staff and guests to participate actively in sustainability efforts. Servant leadership's emphasis on community service and ethical responsibility aligns closely with sustainability principles. Leaders adopting this style prioritize long-term environmental health and social equity, often involving stakeholders in decision-making. Studies highlight that servant leaders foster green psychological capital among hospitality employees, enhancing their motivation to participate in eco-friendly behaviors voluntarily (Luu, 2019). Community-based tourism projects often thrive under servant leadership that values local culture preservation and environmental conservation.

Sustainability in tourism is not only about minimizing environmental impacts but also includes socio-cultural and economic dimensions, supporting host communities' wellbeing and preserving cultural heritage. Leadership that embraces sustainability can guide organizations towards responsible practices that balance these factors while meeting business goals.

Ethical Leadership and Sustainability Integrity

Ethical leadership focuses on guiding organizations with transparency, fairness, and a commitment to moral principles, which underpin sustainable tourism practices. Ethical leaders prioritize environmental integrity and social justice, influencing both employee behaviors and stakeholder relationships. Their commitment to ethical norms fosters trust and accountability, which are critical for implementing sustainability policies effectively. Studies have linked ethical leadership with stronger environmental performance and corporate social responsibility outcomes in the hospitality industry (Haldorai et al., 2022; Karatepe et al., 2022). Ethical leadership embeds integrity in sustainability commitments. Such leaders ensure that tourism operations avoid

"greenwashing" and engage in authentic environmental and social responsibility. Transparency in reporting, fair labor practices, and respect for indigenous rights are hallmarks of ethical leadership in this sector. Empirical evidence shows ethical leaders build trust among employees and external stakeholders, which is essential for effective implementation of sustainability strategies (Haldorai et al., 2022).

Integrating Sustainable Leadership Practices

The effective promotion of environmental sustainability in tourism and hospitality requires integrating these leadership styles within organizational strategies and cultures. This includes embedding sustainability goals into leadership development programs, aligning them with corporate values, and fostering a supportive climate for green innovation. Additionally, green human resource management practices reinforce sustainable leadership by promoting environmentally conscious recruitment, training, and employee engagement (Abualigah et al., 2023; Tuan, 2022). Effective sustainable tourism leadership often requires blending multiple styles. For instance, transformational leadership's visionary drive can be complemented by servant leadership's community focus and ethical leadership's moral guidance. Integrative approaches facilitate comprehensive sustainability strategies that address environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Organizations are encouraged to develop leadership training programs that cultivate these combined competencies, alongside green human resource practices that reinforce sustainable mindsets. Case studies from leading sustainable tourism destinations illustrate the application of these leadership styles. For example, the city of Benidorm in Spain has embraced smart tourism and green leadership to reduce environmental impacts and enhance community involvement. Hotels adopting servant leadership have shown increased employee engagement in sustainability programs, reducing energy use and waste.

Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Tourism Leadership

Challenges include resistance to change, lack of sustainability knowledge, and competing business priorities. However, opportunities lie in leveraging digital technologies for efficient resource management, fostering cross-sector partnerships, and responding to growing consumer demand for responsible tourism.

Recommendations and Future Research Directions

Tourism organizations should institutionalize sustainability in governance structures and leadership development. Further research is recommended to explore leadership impacts on emerging sustainability practices such as regenerative tourism and circular economy models within hospitality.

Conclusion

Leadership approaches significantly influence the adoption and effectiveness of environmental sustainability initiatives in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Transformational leaders inspire innovation and green engagement, servant leaders foster ecological stewardship through service, and ethical leaders uphold integrity and accountability in sustainability efforts. Together, these styles cultivate a culture where environmental responsibility thrives, enabling organizations to meet sustainability challenges and stakeholder expectations in a competitive industry. Leadership styles play a crucial role in embedding environmental sustainability in tourism and hospitality. Transformational, servant, and ethical leadership each offer distinct yet complementary pathways to foster sustainable behaviors and decision-making. Combined efforts

through integrated leadership approaches hold promise for addressing complex sustainability challenges in this dynamic industry.

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