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How people in organizations make sense of responsible leadership practices

Multiple case studies

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss the concept of responsible leadership, find some dimensions and understand how staff in organizations make sense of this style of leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – Multiple exploratory case studies in six Portuguese organizations were performed. As data-collecting instruments, several interviews and documentary analysis were used.

Findings – The authors found four dimensions associated with responsible leadership in the organizations studied here: aggregate of virtues; stakeholder involvement; model of leader's roles; and principles and ethical values. These organizations integrate relationships which seek human well-being, institutions of reference considered good examples to work in and where the best of human nature is stressed. In particular, the *modus operandi* of their responsible leadership implants dynamics which lead to the development of individuals' strengths, resilience and vitality.

Practical/implications – The emphasis of this leadership style points mainly to the existence of modern leaders with an integrating, holistic view of stakeholders where the focus is on carrying out their various roles where virtuousness and ethical values play a determinant role. Interpersonal relationships, ethical principles regarding the environment, peers and the community were also practices identified as associated with responsible leadership.

Originality/value – The study contributes to advancing theory in the field of leadership and presents a new framework (dimensions) about responsible leadership. The study is also innovative because contributes to more knowledge about organizations that follow a responsible style of leadership, and in so doing form consistent practices that can represent benchmarking for other organizational structures, even taking into account the natural idiosyncrasies inherent in the Portuguese organizational and business sector.

Keywords Stakeholders, Responsible leadership, Dimensions, Ethical and moral values, Virtuous

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The most developed societies are going through a period of changing values (Inglehart, 2000, 2008). Besides traditional material values, managers have shown awareness that firms are active social agents and so in their activities they must take into account the various factors and needs society expects from them (Carrasco, 2007).



In recent years, corporate scandals in globally known organizations have provoked a wide-ranging discussion on the role of organizations in society, i.e., their legitimacy, obligations and responsibilities (Maak and Pless, 2006; Voegtlin *et al.*, 2011; Waldman and Siegel, 2008). For Fry and Slocum (2008), the scandals in recent years involving Enron, Tyco, Arthur Andersen and Worldcom, among others, gave people the idea that firms are amoral, corrupt, lacking ethical leadership and a sense of social responsibility.

As a result, organizations and their leaders are increasingly held responsible for what they do, and do not do, by multiple stakeholders and by society as a whole. Given the power of major corporations, particularly stakeholders expect leaders to adopt a more active role, recognizing their co-responsibility in the world's pressing problems such as safeguarding and promoting human rights, ensuring sustainability and contributing to the elimination of poverty (Maak, 2007).

It is therefore recognized that only organizations following responsible principles will survive (DiPiazza and Eccles, 2002). In this movement, Pless (2007) states that the foundations of responsible leadership are based on the social and moral phenomenon which has taken on special relevance not just because of recent scandals but also due to urgent matters affecting life on our planet and the perception that multinational corporations and their leaders have an enormous potential to contribute to a better world. According to Spreitzer *et al.* (2012), there are many reasons for managers concerning themselves with human prosperity and the resultant organizational sustainability.

For Voegtlin (2011), the integrative community of stakeholders on a world scale with such a wide variety of discussions, calls for an understanding of leadership that transcends the double perspective model of leader-follower, leading to one of leadership as stakeholder interaction (Maak and Pless, 2006; Pless, 2007).

Leadership remains predominantly focused on the influence process between leader and employees (e.g. Bass, 1990; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2010). However, it does not take into account stakeholder interactions, which become important for securing the legitimacy of an organization. Thus, there is still a need for a philosophical foundation of responsible leadership that provides an orientation of how to deal with the conflicting norms of a heterogeneous stakeholder society (Voegtlin, 2011).

In order to address these challenges, research emphasizes a stakeholder perspective of leadership (Waldman and Galvin, 2008; Waldman and Siegel, 2008), understanding responsible leadership as a "value-based and through ethical principles driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders" (Pless, 2007, p. 438).

So far, responsible leadership, as the overarching term for the inclusion of ethical and moral aspects in leadership, has remained an underdeveloped field (Ciulla, 2004). Only recently has leadership research once again turned its focus on the phenomenon of responsible leadership in its different facets. Thus, many new approaches within leadership connect to ethical or moral themes. Responsible leadership is understood here by its proponents as an emerging concept at the overlap of studies in ethics, leadership and corporate social responsibility (CSR, Ciulla, 2004; De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008; Maak, 2007; Maak and Pless, 2006; Waldman and Galvin, 2008; Waldman and Siegel, 2008).

Against this background, our main objective is to identify and understand how staff in organizations make sense of responsible leadership dimensions and practices. Therefore, one of the contributions of this study is to recognize the need for such an understanding of and deduce a concept of responsible leadership based on various practices, through ethical and moral principles and on the relationship between leaders

and stakeholders. By identifying and framing various dimensions linked to responsible leadership, the reasons for collaborators' commitment in positive organizations can be explained. This research also takes an innovative view of leadership, where in terms of the dimensions inherent to responsible leadership, attributes considered decisive for positive organizations are shown and clarified. To achieve this goal, we adopt qualitative research (six Portuguese organizations) to examine the main dimensions and practices associated with responsible leadership.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 contains a literature review on responsible leadership. It also introduces a new framework, which is the basis for our analysis. Section 3 outlines our research design, i.e., methodological approach as well as data collection and analysis. In Section 4, we present the characteristics of the organizations, describe and identify the responsible leadership practices and discuss our empirical findings. The last section deals with conclusions, implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Responsible leadership

For Waldman and Galvin (2008), in the modern terminology, responsibility has various meanings but all of them revolve around the notion of control of behaviour through internal mechanisms. To be considered responsible, an individual needs to feel the interior obligation to do the right thing in relation to others, i.e., "act correctly" (Cunha *et al.*, 2007, p. 476) and set himself up as an "agent for world benefit" (Maak and Pless, 2008, p. 60).

The authors argue that responsible leadership is more wide-ranging, more strategically orientated and potentially less controversial than similar concepts such as ethical leadership. Responsible leadership can be defined as a focus on responsibility and directing attention to others, especially to those for whom a leader must be responsible. Responsibility is also commonly associated with freedom of action and capabilities, indicating that responsible individuals are willing, and have the necessary authority, with the available means and resources, to attain objectives or results (Cameron, 2011).

Responsibility is therefore based on extensive moral and/or judicial standards and is directed towards the specific concerns of others. The responsible leader has the obligation to act according to those norms and to be careful regarding his actions (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Cameron, 2011; Maak and Pless, 2006). Rego *et al.* (2007, p. 68) consider that fulfilling the law is an ethical imperative, i.e., leaders must act in accordance with the norms of "communal living stipulated by law".

Responsible leadership is not understood in the same way among the various organizational researchers. For Donaldson and Preston (1995) and Maak and Pless (2006), it is to do with not seeing leadership as a descriptive and instrumental phenomenon but rather from a normative perspective. For these authors, responsible leadership can be defined as the art and skill involved in the construction, culture and maintenance of trusting relationships with the different stakeholders both inside and outside the organization and in coordination of responsible action to reach a meaning, a shared business vision. Apparent in this conception is the understanding of leadership as a social relational phenomenon (the focus moves from leader-subordinate to analysis of the quality of all the leader's relationships with the organization's relevant internal and external stakeholders (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). It is recognized here that firms operate in an increasingly interrelated and globalized world and they must move towards more relational forms of interaction with all the parties involved in organizations (Gond *et al.*, 2011).

In this view, responsible leadership is a relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction with those who affect or are affected by leadership and have a stake in the purpose and vision of the leadership relationship. Broadening the view from a leader-subordinate relationship to a leader-stakeholder relationship challenges some of the underlying assumptions of traditional leadership theory.

2.2 *Responsible leadership style and other current styles*

For Maak and Pless (2006) and Gond *et al.* (2011), in broader position from the point of view of organizational leadership, the vocation of responsible leadership takes stakeholders into account and is distinguished from other styles since it is based on relational processes of those involved in management. This relational management of stakeholders requires that both sides of the relationships have the capacity for mutual influence, with management processes being projected to improve the connections between organizations and other stakeholders.

Five leadership styles reveal the greatest overlap with responsible leadership, namely, transformational, servant, authentic, spiritual and emotional.

From the perspective of Stone *et al.* (2003) and Sheppard *et al.* (2013), the world has become more complicated with the rapid change in the global economic environment, and new times require new dynamics and active leaders able to cope with fundamental questions. In this situation, transformational leadership and servant leadership provide a conceptual structure for the new dynamics now required for leadership. According to Metcalf and Benn (2013), authentic and transformational leadership styles are directly or indirectly linked to business sustainability and social responsibility, values observed by the responsible leadership style.

Although transformational leadership has been suitably researched and become common practice, the theory of responsible leadership needs additional support. Based on the conceptualization by Brown and Trevino (2006), these authors also try to clarify the relationships between transformational leadership and the servant theory of leadership. However, servant leadership provides leaders with great opportunities. For Stone *et al.* (2003), this recent leadership style puts the accent on other people, i.e., on those it should serve, unlike other styles that do not emphasize this focus so much.

In Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Shamir and Eilam (2005), authentic leadership can incorporate transformational, charismatic, servant, spiritual or other forms of positive leadership. However, in contrast to transformational leadership, in particular, authentic leadership may or may not be charismatic. These leaders build lasting relationships, work with great determination, meaning, purpose and values, but are not necessarily described as charismatic leaders according to the definition of the central component of transformational leadership stated by Bass (1990). They believe the main difference is that authentic leaders are anchored in their deep sense of self. They know how to place themselves in important matters, values and beliefs. For example, whereas charismatic leaders use rhetoric to persuade, influence and mobilize followers, an authentic leader “energizes” followers through creating meaning and positive building of the social situation for himself and his followers. Therefore, transformational leaders can be authentic or non-authentic and non-transformational leaders can also be authentic (Shamir and Eilam, 2005).

Also according to Avolio and Gardner (2005), and in contrast to the theory of authentic leadership studied by the authors, explicit recognition of the importance of the mediating role of self-awareness and regulation of followers, as well as of positive psychological capital and a positive organizational context, are largely absent from the

theory inherent to servant leadership. Also for these authors, the theory of spiritual leadership put forward by Fry (2003) includes implicit recognition of the role of the leader's self-awareness with a focus on the leader's vision, values and attitudes which are generally classified as altruistic love and hope/faith. Those values/attitudes are also described as leader behaviours, causing some confusion in relation to those constructs and their role in spiritual leadership. Overlapping areas between authentic and spiritual leadership theories include the focus on integrity, confidence, courage, hope and resilience. Avolio and Gardner (2005) consider that spiritual leadership neglects consideration of self-regulation and the moderating role of the organizational context.

In the view of Humphrey (2002), emotional leadership also takes on various facets, which leads to different types of leadership requiring different emotional capacities of leadership. So, for example, in difficult circumstances, transformational leaders need a strong emotional component of self-management so as to develop the vision they transmit to their followers.

In this analysis, and according to Dulewicz and Higgs (2005), the literature suggests that the situation or context is highly relevant for the leadership style. In addition, many claim that leadership nowadays is largely a question of how to handle and lead change, and so the leader's effectiveness has to be assessed in the light of recourse to different behaviour in various contexts of change. Besides, it must not be forgotten, as Ilies *et al.* (2004) demonstrated, that a significant part of the inheritance of responsible leadership is due to transmission of individual differences associated with other leadership styles (Rajah *et al.*, 2011).

2.3 Dimensions of responsible leadership

The stakeholder approach (e.g. Freeman, 1984; Freeman and Gilbert, 1989; Maak and Pless, 2006) has warranted great attention in modern ethical and social responsibility theories. At the core is the idea that leading firms should not just follow the interests of shareholders or owners, but also have consideration for the interests of other stakeholders (employees, managers, the local community, customers, suppliers and business partners).

For Maak and Pless (2006), the purpose of leadership in the context of stakeholder and social responsibility theory is: construction and maintenance of sustainable trusting relationships with all stakeholders both inside and outside the organization; coordination of the various actions so as to attain common objectives; organizational sustainability and legitimacy; helping to achieve the common good; and implementing a shared organizational vision.

From the stakeholder perspective, there is a growing movement towards framing responsibility in terms of balance performed by organizational leaders. Therefore, at top management level, leaders are responsible for a wider range of stakeholders including employees, customers or consumer groups, or even environmentalists, i.e., a wider community in which the firm operates. From this perspective, it is argued that the needs of each of those groups should be considered in decision making and in the actions of those in a position of organizational leadership. This view suggests that the person in charge takes into account the needs and interests of employees, besides the return for shareholders. In this way, responsible leadership practices try to follow norm SA 8000[1] – directed towards socially responsible management of employees and implicitly fulfilling the OIT conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other conventions (Seabra, 2012).

This aspect of leadership deals with corporate citizenship which extends beyond philanthropy to all firms' business practices. Here, leaders operate transparently in financial practices, instigating benefits for collaborators, exploiting opportunities responsibly, focusing on the positive impact on communities, acting with a view to the future through socially responsible charitable commitments based on a desire for a better world (Cunha *et al.*, 2007; Maak, 2007; Rego *et al.*, 2007). They are leaders who should be understood "as human beings like all others, who have gained a licence to lead their followers" (Maak and Pless, 2006, p. 112).

Therefore, with a firm's assets belonging to its investors, its management has the duty to administer those assets responsibly and the modern corporation must try to create value for all its constituent parts. In the conception of Maak and Pless (2006), evolution of the hierarchical model to network structures, from national to transnational operations, the change of focus from the shareholder to the stakeholder, the change in understanding the independence of actors in society to the logic of organizational citizenship, has to modify the concept of the leadership role. This orientation aims to focus attention on creating value for all stakeholders as they have legitimate interests which are often different from those of shareholders. In this way, the top manager, irrespective of the different role he has in organizational life, is a fundamental element of implementation of socially responsible management (Seabra, 2012). For this author, the leadership of top management and its decisive role at the heart of firms, ends up leading to dissemination of socially responsible principles of action, and at a more advanced stage, the top manager is the reference for the firm's social responsibility.

In addition, in a context of networks and multi-stakeholder environments, the leadership function gains a new meaning. The leader is no longer seen as an individual standing out at the top of the pyramid as the only creator of the situation. This requires the leader to be closely linked to stakeholders. Metaphorically speaking, the leader needs to be at the centre of a web of relationships. Leading with visionary principles guided by, and with a view to, relationships, is an activity of maintaining and growing the network through concern for relationships between stakeholders and network members (Pless, 2007).

Also according to Tichy and Bennis (2010, p. 56), "in the language of social psychology, a person's social network is a map of all the relevant links between the points studied. The network can also serve to determine the value of the relationships formed between individuals [...] in which leadership has a determinant role in the team dynamics, in its alignment and in the relationships formed in the organization between all stakeholders". The leader serves the network as a driver to take advantage of capacities, encouraging teamwork and use of its members' best resources. For the authors, "it is the leader's responsibility to build knowledge creating processes for his team and ensure these processes are carried out" (p. 273).

For Cunha *et al.* (2007), changes in the world of work and the creation of organizations with increasingly fluid frontiers brought about the growing importance of (informal) social networks. For the authors, the probability of a professional or responsible leader seeking information or knowledge from a friend or colleague is five times greater than seeking it from an impersonal source. Despite finding that the position and reputation of each individual in the formal structure of organizations is a major source of power since these are characteristics that get things moving and go beyond formal authority (Pfeffer, 1992), in the day-to-day business of carrying out their complex tasks, managers seek out colleagues at all hierarchical levels who can provide certain benefits, such as: advice, information and support (Rank and Tuschke, 2010).

This view points to responsible managers acting with modesty and integrity, trying to make decisions based on listening to different points of analysis and with definite attention to the social networks they are part of. Due to these effects, feelings of friendship between top executives can positively influence their collaborative interaction. Uzzi (1996) emphasized the positive effects of bonds of friendship in the joint solution of problems.

Responsible leadership is based on the ideal of ethical discourse and can be understood as a continuum from the leader who acts exclusively according to an instrumental-strategic rationale towards the ideal responsible leader (Voegtlin, 2011). The stakeholders' perspective suggests that those leaders are likely to have a strong sense of values, of the importance of the needs and interests of a wide variety of individuals who can be affected by the leader's actions and decisions. This vision incorporates an orientation towards values forming responsible leadership. An important area of contribution towards the ideal of "responsible leadership" is managing the relationship with employees in organizations. Human Resources professionals can provide processes and tools that facilitate relational interaction with employees regarding matters of CSR. They can support management of the employer-employee relationship. They can help to reach a better balance of power between business leaders and employees, giving employees a voice (empowerment). This orientation increases the potential influence of employees in responsible corporate leadership (Gond *et al.*, 2011).

According to Orlitzky *et al.* (2011), employees' perceptions regarding aspects connected to CSR are found to be significantly related to affective organizational commitment, showing that CSR can also be an important concern for employees and a decisive element in forming the link with their leaders and organizations.

The stakeholder perspective suggests that responsible leadership is not (or should not be) always translated in monetary terms. The accuracy of calculations on possible returns from any investment diminishes over time and, to a certain extent, depending on the nature of the investment. Therefore, Chun (2005) points out that managers must involve stakeholders, for them to propose ideas about how to maintain and develop those virtues both inside and outside the organization. It is an analysis pointing towards the possibility of strategic virtues being created, developed, managed and promoted, in order to differentiate one firm from another.

"In the line of thought connected to responsible leadership, Cunha *et al.* (2007, p. 470) point out that 'leaders' virtues are essential for the development of positive organizations. Remaining faithful to commitments, management by example, and practices with modesty, perseverance, authority with responsibility, gratefulness or listening to collaborators' feelings are priceless values for modern leadership with a positive impact on organizations". Also Cameron (2011) emphasizes that responsible leadership is rare in organizations, putting forward the idea that organizations need responsible, virtuous leaders.

In the evidence of Cameron (2011), and accepting virtuousness as a key attribute of responsible leadership, it provides at least two functional benefits. One advantage is the role played by virtuousness in creating a determinant point in decision making, and the second benefit is the increased performance that virtuousness produces in organizations. In this aspect, organizations with higher scores in virtuousness demonstrated significantly higher productivity, higher quality and greater employee retention than other organizations.

The concept of virtue is a term denoting universal standards of correctness, rectitude and goodness, with the matter of virtue in organizations gaining greater

prominence in recent years mainly following the latest corporate scandals involving Enron, Worldcom and others, which caused increasing interest in the virtue, or the lack of it, demonstrated by organizational leaders (Hackett and Wang, 2012; Pearce *et al.*, 2006; Rego *et al.*, 2009). So there is a growing need to explore new approaches in order to strengthen the ethical behaviour of leaders (Hackett and Wang, 2012).

In this conceptual framework and in a vast analysis of the literature, in Hackett and Wang (2012), the concept of leaders' virtue derives from Aristotelian logic and Confucian perspectives, that is to say, virtue is a character trait.

According to Pearce *et al.* (2006), virtuous leadership can be presented and formally designated as covering vertical leaders who operate through shared leadership. In this understanding, virtuous leadership is an important facilitator of learning in organizations, allowing formation of the necessary trust and openness which are fundamental for the creation and transformation of knowledge in organizations. In this view, for example, sharing ideas and concerns does not weaken leadership, but rather strengthens it around a common objective or cause.

As such, any definition of virtuous leadership must include specifically the search for fair and moral objectives for individuals and the organizations in which they work. These must form good places in which to work (positive firms) set in "good societies", and so for Cameron *et al.* (2003), managers must be guided by the following organizational virtues: purpose (a shared vision of the organization's moral objectives); safety (protection against threats, danger and exploitation); fairness (equitable treatment through clear directives on reward and punishment); humanity (concern and mutual help); and decency (treating everyone in the organization individually, respecting their position).

These organizational virtues are interlinked with subjective experiences (happiness, pleasure, fulfilment, well-being) and with the positive strength of individual traits (character, interests, talents and values) inherent in leaders (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Management that is directed only by profit is not compatible with development based on practicing virtue. Therefore, one of the great advantages of practice founded on virtue is that it evokes an alternative vision to the dominant practice, and that option is extremely necessary in business today. This vision incorporates a characteristic of carrying out business with virtue (Dawson and Bartholomew, 2003). In the perception of Cameron (2011), and accepting virtue as a key attribute of responsible leadership, it provides at least two functional benefits. One advantage is the role virtue plays in creating a determining point in decision making and the second is the increased performance that virtue produces in organizations. In this aspect, organizations scoring highest in virtue demonstrated significantly higher productivity, higher quality and employee retention than other organizations.

Summarizing, Table I shows the main dimensions that can be used in responsible leadership.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Type of research approach

Given the research objective, we adopt qualitative research to examine the main dimensions and practices associated with responsible leadership. Case studies are recommended when the social and personal context is of fundamental importance for the understanding and interpretation of the phenomena (Yin, 2009; Newman, 1994). In particular, a multiple holistic design is suitable (Yin, 2009), since several cases are to

| Dimensions | Description | Author(s) |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Aggregate of virtues | Virtuousness is a term denoting universal patterns of correctness, rectitude and goodness. The distinction between right and wrong in the leadership function, taking measures to ensure justice and honesty, influencing and allowing others to morally follow fair objectives for themselves and their organizations, and helping others to interconnect with a higher purpose are all aspects considered in the aggregate of virtues | Cameron <i>et al.</i> (2003, 2004), Cameron (2011), Chun (2005), Gond <i>et al.</i> (2011), Havard (2010), Maak and Pless (2006), Pearce <i>et al.</i> (2006), Pless (2007), Rego <i>et al.</i> (2007, 2009), Rego and Cunha (2011), Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Voegtlin (2011) |
| Stakeholder involvement | The stakeholder community calls for comprehension of leadership which, first, transcends the double perspective model of leader-follower, leading to an understanding of leadership as stakeholder interaction. The majority of challenges that leaders face in a global world arise from the interaction with countless stakeholders locally, regionally and globally inside and outside the organization | Gond <i>et al.</i> (2011), Maak and Pless (2006), Pless (2007), Rego <i>et al.</i> (2007) |
| Model of leader's roles | Responsible leaders have the intellectual capacity to process complex situations and solve problems that involve different points of view, respecting the diversity of perspectives and even conflicting objectives. They act according to moral values and demonstrate authenticity and integrity. An integrated holistic model of the leader's roles is framed herein: The leader as steward, citizen, visionary, servant, coach, architect, story-teller, interpreter of meanings and agent of change | Cunha <i>et al.</i> (2007), Maak and Pless (2006) |
| Principles and ethical values | Considers that leaders produce decisions, so bringing different interests of satisfaction, and if possible, mutually beneficial solutions. Concept of responsible leadership based on value, through ethical principles and the relationship between leaders and interested parties. The role of ethical principles can be strategic and presents the scale of development of virtue in organizations. This dimension considers business ethics as the basis of leadership in companies | Cunha <i>et al.</i> (2007), Hackett and Wang (2012), Maak and Pless (2006) |

Table I.
Dimensions of responsible leadership

be analysed. It is from this perspective that Guba and Lincoln (1994) highlight the validity of qualitative research as a relevant process for understanding human behaviour, its meaning and purpose in carrying out activities, precisely, the importance of its contribution to contextualizing the information collected. Its goal is to understand the situation, mainly from the participants' point of view rather than the researcher's.

Qualitative methods have been gaining acceptance in the leadership research community (e.g. Bryman *et al.*, 1996; Berson *et al.*, 2001; Lord and Maher, 1991). For Avolio *et al.* (2003), Bryman (2004), Gardner *et al.* (2010) and Lessard-Hébert *et al.* (2010), in the last three decades a growing number of studies have used qualitative research methods. In their analysis, the third research strategy most prominent in the *Leadership Quarterly* journal was content/case analysis in the category of qualitative methods. This shows therefore the multiplicity of dimensions that may exist in diverse situations, while stressing what is solid (Creswell *et al.*, 2007; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2010; Turner, 2010). From this perspective, as noted by Sjöberg *et al.* (1991), the case study is an ideal methodology for a holistic approach – integrated analysis. Through this strategy, this type of approach is shown to be the most suitable to respond to the topic under study, given its scope, complexity, topicality and integrative context (Bonoma, 1985; Woodside, 2010).

3.2 Case selection, context and key informants

The organizational cases for the present study were selected by the convenience sample method (Patton, 1990). The task was to choose organizations that would have responsible practices. In Portugal, some cases of businesses associated with orientation towards socially responsible services to the community are reported in national or local papers and magazines. However, selection of the organizations was primarily determined by personal contacts with owner-managers and other collaborators/staff, in order to gain trustworthy information about the real situation of their leadership. Based on these insights, we made an exemplary selection of six organizations which adopt responsible practices.

For Coutinho (2011), although generically the “sampling” technique is not characterized in terms of qualitative research, as opposed to what is found in quantitative research, the six organizations (cases) studied are considered holistically, as units of analysis, multiple case studies. The task was to choose organizations according to the following criteria: greater access to respondents – better access to information; geographical location; orientation towards training and social responsibility services to the community; empirical knowledge of existing leaderships and their practices – recognized and valued by the community; and organizations considered good places to work in. Six Portuguese organizations were therefore selected: Vidis Group (case 1), Magril (case 2), Huf Portuguesa (case 3), Habidecor (case 4), Lanidor Group (case 5) and *Fundação Joaquim Santos/Escola Profissional de Torredeita* (case 6).

The context of this study was Portuguese companies. We do not believe this topic means something different in other countries and cultures, since this study seeks to demonstrate there are Portuguese organizations that clearly pay attention to dimensions and practices of responsible leadership – organizations concerned about the environment and recognized by the community as good places to work in. We can even extrapolate that the moral and ethics contained in responsible leadership should be basic principles in any culture that values evolution and development. We also argue that this leadership style, if duly framed in the Portuguese situation, can raise a greater capacity of management and development. Responsible leadership is not common in Portugal!

Bearing in mind the high total number of people this research could target, a significant sample was sought. Contact was made with 28 informants, from top management to the lowest level of collaborator and at all hierarchical levels of the organizations involved. In these organizations, top managers/owners, heads of human

resource departments and operational collaborators (manual workers, engineers or salespeople) were approached, and the focus was essentially on understanding the phenomenon through listening to four to five collaborators per organization. This study aimed to tie in with the understanding of various authors, for example, Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2010) and Coutinho (2011) where it is highlighted that the size of the sample is not a critical factor of success and it is not through extensive research that quality is assured. In the view of Woodside (2010), the main criticisms of researchers basing their work on case studies, through large research samples (i.e. $n > 100$) of people, families, informal groups or organizations includes the inability to confirm conversations held, behaviours and events, whatever the person studied. The optimal size of the “sample” depends on the parameters of the phenomenon studied and the results between the intervention and control groups, with sample size being determined by the optimal number necessary to allow valid inferences to be made about the population (Marshall, 1996).

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data collection in the qualitative paradigm, besides the natural, social environment, involves the direct participation of the researcher, in this way contributing to understanding and description of real situations and in this setting “the complexity of the social world presents permanent changes and it is impossible to establish laws similar to those of Natural Sciences” (Coutinho, 2011, p. 202). This is a study that uses various sources of information and aims for a thorough and complete portrayal of reality.

Based on Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Hancock and Algozzine (2006), Mason (2006) and Woodside (2010), in data collection use was made of personal interviews, direct observation made on on-site visits and document analysis. According to Yin (2009) and Patton (1990), these sources of evidence can be the focus of data collection for individual case stories.

Most of the data were collected from interviews, which were conducted in Portuguese using semi-structured questionnaires as a guide. They included questions about the organizations in order to obtain key figures and facts, the informants’ characteristics and attitudes, as well as the main dimensions and practices associated with responsible leadership. As stated by Turner (2010), one of the most popular areas of interest in the design of qualitative research focuses on the interview protocol.

In addition to the interviews, which have the advantage of focusing on the topic of the case study, consequently allowing inferences to be made (Yin, 2009), we exploited secondary data sources to verify the statements and to obtain supplementary information. Such multiple-data collection allows a more thorough examination of each organization. Herein, document analysis was considered for data triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) and for larger construct validity (Yin, 2009). The documental analysis we performed embraced all types of documents provided by the organizations/ firms or that were available in the public domain, such as the firm’s website, annual reports and other documents.

The interviews were held from July to November 2012 and lasted on average 48 minutes each. In all interviewees, as mentioned, the respondent was the owner-manager and other collaborators. Thus, the units of analysis were organizations/ firms and the respective collaborators.

Concerning data analysis, this study focuses on descriptive and exploratory approaches to explain the main dimensions and practices concerning responsible leadership. The data were analysed using content analysis. Bardin (2008),

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2010) and Lessard-Hébert *et al.* (2010) underline the importance of these instruments for analysis of narrative.

The interviews were transcribed, which was extremely useful during data analysis. It was thus possible to reproduce and re-analyse the collected data. To this end, we compared the notes systematically to build a database, i.e., a computerized base was created with all the interviews, qualitative elements, various references and all the evidence linked to the organizations' past. To analyse the qualitative data, global content analysis was performed and the summarized information translated into histograms/succinct statistical analysis provided by the NVIVO tool. The interview results were then combined with other documentary evidence to produce a detailed individual story report.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Organizations' characteristics

With reference to the above, the data reported in this study were based on six organizations/firms. Table II presents a profile of these cases. As shown, the sample is composed of organizations with some diversity within industry. All the firms were founded a considerable time ago, the majority (four of them) having been in business for more than forty years.

4.2 Responsible leadership practices

The objective of this section is to identify the main practices associated with responsible leadership present in some Portuguese organizations. The list of dimensions derives from the theoretical framework in Section 2.2. The dimensions cited by the organizations/cases are shown in Table III.

| Cases | Firm | Economic sector | Year of foundation | No. of employees | Annual sales 2011 (Euros) | Juridical form |
|-------|---------------------------|---|--------------------|------------------|---------------------------|---|
| 1 | Vidis | Drinks distribution | 1991 | 80 | 6 Million | S Corporation |
| 2 | Magril | Agricultural machinery | 1985 | 23 | 5 Million | S Corporation |
| 3 | Lanidor | Women's clothing | 1966 | 789 | 50.5 Million | S Corporation |
| 4 | Huf Portuguesa | Manufacture of access systems, safety and locking devices | 1991 | 345 | 74.6 Million | S Corporation |
| 5 | Habidecor | Textiles for the home | 1977 | 180 | 10 Million | Corporation |
| 6 | Joaquim Santos Foundation | Technical college | 1967 | 140 | – | Private Institution of Social Solidarity (IPSS) |

Table II.
Sample profile

| Dimensions | Cases | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | |
| Aggregate of virtues | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Stakeholder involvement | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Model of leader's roles | X | | X | X | X | X | |
| Principles and ethical values | X | X | | X | | X | |

Note: X, degree of importance

Table III.
Organizations' responsible leadership dimensions

We found fewer dimensions associated with responsible leadership cited by the firms of Magril, Lanidor and Habidecor (cases 1, 3 and 5), whereas firms 1, 4 and 6 cited all of these dimensions. On the whole, from the empirical evidence we can elucidate that all of the six organizations studied cited “stakeholder involvement” and “aggregate of virtues”, as important dimensions of responsible leadership.

In fact, in our study we pursue a more qualitative approach in order to gain a richer understanding of the dimensions and practices associated with responsible leadership named by the respondents. Thus, each dimension we studied will be completed through content analysis.

4.2.1 Aggregate of virtues. Responsible leadership corresponds to virtuous leadership, focusing on the greater potential of human systems – “aggregate of virtues” (Cameron *et al.*, 2003; Cameron, 2011). Responsible leaders, as shown in the case studies made, are modest, magnanimous and encourage others to act, teaching and inspiring. This is illustrated, for example, in the declaration by the Administrator of Habidecor (case 5): “[...] having a human perspective of management, and a human perspective does not necessarily mean a condescending perspective but rather having the conception that we are dealing with people who deserve our respect, they are fathers, mothers, sisters, and so we must keep this in mind”.

The President of the Vidis Group in case 1 said also that: “through socializing in the firm, this ends up helping motivation. We act so that the team acts in accordance with a positive mental attitude. This is done! We try to find out if people are all right [...] we look for a positive spirit, good-natured [...] of course. The results are a consequence of rules, socializing, shared responsibility, they must feel the firm is theirs and feel pride”.

According to Hackett and Wang (2012) and Havard (2010), this is leadership that gives less demonstration of power, but is directed towards strengthening others and which, through consistent motivating behaviour, creates appropriate affective commitment in the organization (Rego *et al.*, 2009) and can affect organizational effectiveness and employee well-being (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001).

These quotes illustrate that the strategic virtues of leaders are recognized as incorporating the knowledge and development of the organizations and their members, in line with the understanding of Chun (2005). In the organizations studied, it stands out there is a higher score in virtue, i.e., there is a greater preponderance of this dimension (aggregate of virtues) in various firms studied and that is not common to the other dimensions analysed, as explained in the field study. This dimension demonstrates higher productivity, higher quality and retention of employees. This is evident in the elements gathered in the case studies described above, for example, in the quality of Habidecor products (case 3) (especially characteristic of a very stable workforce with low absenteeism) or also in collaborator retention in Huf Portuguesa (case 4), thanks to the existing characteristics of virtuous leadership and in line with Cameron (2011) who considers virtue as a key attribute of responsible leadership:

In Lanidor, “There is this concern. Although often we don’t manage to reach each person individually, collectively we try, for example, when we give people their birthday as a day of holidays, on that day they know they don’t work, they can be with the family, stay with the family, sleep, go to the seaside, it’s their own day” (Human Resources Director, case 3).

Cameron *et al.* (2004), in a transversal study carried out in 52 American industrial firms in 16 sectors of activity, also concluded that when there is virtue in organizations it is

positively correlated with organizational performance and also innovation, employee retention, profitability and quality are elements associated positively with virtue.

4.2.2 Stakeholder involvement. Concerning the evidence of the “stakeholder involvement” dimension, it stands out that the voice given to employees is apparent, increasing their influence on the responsible leadership in each organization visited. This perspective is in accordance with the literature review carried out, namely, in the considerations of Chun (2005) and Gond *et al.* (2011). In this understanding of stakeholder consideration, it is assumed leaders demonstrate they have a strong sense of values influenced by a large number of individuals who can affect their actions and decisions.

In the organizations studied, leadership is understood as stakeholder interaction, going beyond the leader-follower model. These organizations do not see themselves as islands and are firmly rooted in society and in their environment. In this connection, the statement appearing in the sustainability report of Huf Portuguesa (case 4) stands out: “We want to contribute to developing the local and regional community, collaborating loyally with both the authorities and the community”:

Case 5 has always been greatly concerned with values of sustainability, “and especially since 2002, the care inherent in strong awareness about protecting the environment has increased. Therefore, during 2010, we continued the firm’s strategy of gathering, separating and forwarding the solid waste produced for recycling. There was also tight control in managing waste water, for which a firm was contracted for advice in this matter. [...] also regarding protection of air quality, periodic monitoring of gas emission from the chimneys has been carried out [...]” (Extract from the Management Report, 2010, case 5).

In this stakeholder involvement, social networks are important to create opportunities and knowledge transfer, and responsible leaders show clear use of these informal relationships. The literature review also considered the important work of Cunha *et al.* (2007), Maak and Pless (2006), Pless (2007), Rank and Tuschke (2010) and Tichy and Bennis (2010), which give support to this organizational perception:

Also of note is the attention paid by the Joaquim dos Santos Foundation (case 6) to its social involvement in the rural environment, its sustainable practices and safety concerns: – “the very courses are directed towards the region and its development, and the feedback we receive from firms is extremely positive with regard to our students. They carry out work placement and we get a very positive return from firms” (Teacher, case 6).

The atmosphere at work and the pride in forming one of the best national firms to work in are sustained elements in Huf Portuguesa. This approach is in accordance with modern ethical theories and those of social responsibility which see organizations as more than the concept of aggregate value for shareholders, i.e., they consider the interests of all parties involved (employees, state, suppliers, customers, future generations, etc.). This evidence is clearly identified in the organizations studied and visible in the literature in Cunha *et al.* (2007), Maak and Pless (2006) or Seabra (2012).

Other interviewees’ declarations also show concern for environmental problems:

Environmental problems are normally related to economic problems, for example, we are going to save paper because saving paper means saving trees annually, but it also means saving money for the firm, that is to say, we always keep abreast of things because on the economic side of the firm, interests have always kept abreast [...] (Director of Quality and Innovation, case 3).

It should be mentioned that Huf Portuguesa (case 4) also pays special attention to energy, water, environmental emissions and waste water; the report referred to illustrates that

“from 2010, the benefits related to the environment are greater than the associated costs. The benefits calculated are due to the value of waste, especially scrap metal and plastic” (p. 24). “The environmental impact is assessed and the possibility of other types of packaging is studied, for example, returnables, and the best solution is found [...] Overall, in the last 10 years, a reduction of around 73% of waste generated has been observed”:

[...] the environment is well protected here, we are permanently audited. Just last week there was a work health and safety audit. There is concern for the environment [...] I think we are almost a model [...] (Sales Logistics, case 4).

There is clear concern for collaborators, there is clear concern for the society around us, there is certainly clear concern about environmental matters, the question of safety. This is very strong, it is something we live, not just a façade [...] And when there is something that in fact can endanger someone working here, everything is done and people get together to do it immediately, so there is great concern with all these factors involved from the shareholder to the most junior collaborator in the firm (Head of Quality, case 4).

4.2.3 Model of leader's roles. Concerning the “model of leader's roles” dimension, clearly evident in the sources adopted, there is an almost generalized consideration of the importance of leaders working for the common good, and in this aspect, the leaders of the organizations involved try to exercise their functions through a shared organizational vision based on values for the future, concerned with organizational citizenship, operating in duly transparent contexts, focusing on having a positive impact on society, supporting others decisively. They form examples, and as Seabra (2012) suggests, the top manager is, at an advanced stage, the reference of the organization's social responsibility. Corroborating this vision, consider the following extract from the Joaquim dos Santos Foundation “[...] We have the example of the inspector, our founder, defending the land, heritage, roots, strong connections with the area [...] we contribute to the region's development [...]” (case 6).

In the cases studied, the leaders are generally considered as examples of good practices to follow, representing, in various situations analysed, a motive of pride for the collaborators involved. In the organizations studied there are countless mentions of the leader as a trainer, an architect, a narrator of stories, but essentially a visionary and agent of change. The leader of Habidecor (case 5) wisely designed the firm he wanted to build, changing direction when he decided the time was right. The Founder Arcides Simões also constructed an organization always with a timeless or visionary horizon and is seen as an example of regional or national stature (seen in the honorary title attributed and shown above):

The firm's leadership holds the moral high ground. He makes the difference, explains well what is intended – good orientation, indicating the direction to follow well. He knows what he's doing [...] he is concerned about the parties involved (people, collaborators, clients) (Logistics coordinator, case 1).

In the general scheme of things, people are motivated and rewarded for increasing the quality of their work. Obviously, things were better before, especially regarding monetary incentives, but better days will come. The management's promises are fulfilled [...] contributing to better involvement of all, even the “slackers” –informal socializing among collaborators outside working hours—which helps to create bonds of friendship, having a few drinks [...] leisure and bonds are strengthened (Logistics coordinator, case 1).

[...] our employees who do not earn more than the minimum salary, up to 600€, have their children's school books paid for by the firm, because when September comes round, for a

couple with two children, this means the salary goes on books, that is, the choice is the money going on books and they don't eat, they have to make ends meet [...] (Director of Quality and Innovation, case 3).

The responsible leaders observed in this research demonstrate appropriate capacities to attain various objectives, they improve cooperation between the parties involved, look after satisfying the needs of others, develop lasting friendly relationships that contribute to employee loyalty, solve complex situations and use emotional and relational intelligence – in line with the study by Maak and Pless (2006) and Uzzi (1996).

4.2.4 Principles and ethical values. Regarding the “Principles and ethical values” perceived in these responsible leaders, they are considered to be managers who act according to values of modesty and integrity. In the Vidis Group these values are in force as can be seen in the following quotation:

The leader is the first to encourage and positively transmit a communication that helps us [...] It is evident and we are happy to know our boss. In many other cases, people don't know who he is and here the door is always open. It isn't rhetoric, it's practice. Everyone can confirm it [...] For everyone that knows him, he started from nothing [...] he got on through dedication, passion, ability, honesty, [...] we just have to follow his footsteps. It's the same between father and son: if a father enters into shady dealings he'll never be able to give an example [...] here there's a good example! The leader here is like that so we have to follow him. He has values of integrity and ability (Salesman, case 1).

Responsible leaders know how to put themselves in the place of their collaborators, experience their problems and help, they are teachers and personal and professional coaches, operating with transparency and direct their organizations towards organizational citizenship and comprehension of the actors involved. They act according to moral values, show good character, possess moral and relational qualities, form trusting relationships and are central in balancing the employer-employee power relationship. For example, the following statements stand out “I ended up communicating those values [...] I am an ethical person, everything within norms [...] I'm demanding. For me, values are fundamental, honesty, ethics in work” (case 2).

In the Magril group, the leader's principles and ethical values are also greatly in evidence:

I experienced that [...] I had an accident at work and know what that is, the firm always showed total collaboration. I never felt alone. A finger got cut off, but I always had the firm's total collaboration, they collaborated [...] (that's my view [...] laughter) [...] In the case of Sr. Celestino (the man at the top) it'll have been the fact he was once an employee and understood the difficulties. He understands what we are going through, and so there's that understanding between management and the collaborator, that tolerance is part of it [...] (Magril, Head of Parts Department, case 2).

Here there are values of integrity which help us and are of interest for the future. They invest in us. We too have to invest in the company! It gives us good examples so that we're ready to work well. There's encouragement [...] He's the first to give encouragement [...] They're transparent. What they show is what they are. They're genuine people. They don't give themselves airs [...] exactly. What is said is what is done. There are no half measures [...] I speak for myself, when I was ill (3 days) nothing was taken off my pay. He just said: when you're well come back to work, but you know you can count on us when it's necessary (Counter Assistant, case 2).

Strong leadership, leadership that above all knows how to listen, manages to have a dialogue, understands problems, that is pedagogical, that educates people, that has values, that has principles, and this is evident afterwards when we ask what is thought of management in this company [...] over 90% of people agree and think we are well managed, so that says it all (Head of Communication, case 4).

For me, it is vision and values. The vision which is rather advanced and a person's values, because I think, in any situation, a person with values gets over everything in life, as I usually say. When the person is correct, the person will never [...] I think that nothing will go wrong if the person is correct, with values and acting according to principles. Trying never to harm anyone, that's the path I also seek [...] (Nursery School Teacher, case 6).

In the leadership of the six organizations(cases) studied, there is a whole set of values based on ethical discourse (Voegtlin, 2011) and which are commonly practiced in their collaborators' involvement, contributing to the organization's overall development (Chun, 2005). These are modern, responsible leaders, possessing values of knowledge, honesty and modesty, able to manage effectively in most of the world and who mobilize followers whatever the context (Steers *et al.*, 2012).

4.3 *Responsible leadership dimensions: a brief discussion*

Table IV brings together some of the major practices characterizing each of these four dimensions of responsible leadership identified in this study. Some practices associated with responsible leadership dimensions are presented.

Responsible leadership is equated to virtuous leadership, focusing on the greater potential of human systems – “aggregate of virtues” (Cameron *et al.*, 2003; Cameron, 2011). Concerning this dimension, a longitudinal study by Wharton and Erickson (1993) found a positive relationship between emotional work and professional satisfaction.

| Dimensions | Responsible leadership practices |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Aggregate of virtues | Positive and stimulating atmosphere Collaborators' well-being Positive spirit Shared responsibility Emotional commitment Employee retention |
| Stakeholder involvement | Respect for social values Corporate social responsibility Environment, sustainability and safety Social networks |
| Model of leader's roles | Organizational citizenship Shared vision Reward system Collaborator development Friendship and loyalty Emotional and relational intelligence Feeling of belonging |
| Principles and ethical values | Management by example Integrity and ability Communication Moral and relational values Social benefits |

Table IV.
Dimensions and practices of responsible leadership

In this connection, Bakker and Schaufeli (2008) state that more than ever, managers agree that employees make a big difference when it comes to innovation, organizational performance and competitiveness and so at the end of the day, business success.

Instead of traditional organizational structures that rely above all on management control and economic principles of cost reduction, efficiency and money, some authors (e.g. Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1962) understand that modern organizations focus on management of human capital. For Cabrita (2009), with this orientation having existed since the 1960s, more recently, research on the subject has tried to understand human competences and relate them to organizations' nuclear competences.

Therefore, this study shows the need to form leaders who are in tune with emotional questions. For Goleman *et al.* (2009), leaders' way of acting, not only what they do but how they do it, is the fundamental key to effective leadership.

Traditionally, this has not been a major focus of any development of corporate leadership or other business programmes. With a high awareness, emotional leaders are skilled at understanding and managing human emotions as an inevitable phenomenon in a corporate environment, and taking advantage of them as a source of energy and influence on the follower's behaviour, moulding it. For example, aligning employees with an exciting vision for a new product development project team requires a leader who uses well developed emotional skills (Quatro *et al.*, 2007).

In the line of thought connected to this aspect of responsible leadership, Cunha *et al.* (2007, p. 470) point out that "leaders" virtues are essential for the development of positive organizations. Remaining faithful to commitments, management by example, perseverance, authority with responsibility, gratefulness or "listening to the heart" of collaborators are inestimable values for modern leadership that have a positive impact on organizations".

In the organizations studied here, social networks are important to create opportunities and transfer knowledge, and responsible leaders clearly demonstrate recourse to these informal relationships. For example, Huf Portuguesa (case 4) possesses undeniable capacities of social intelligence patent in promoting and integrating the firm through solid social networks: universities, associations, volunteering, political power and support for the community it is part of.

The literature review also considered the important work by Cunha *et al.* (2007), Haase and Franco (2011), Maak and Pless (2006), Pless (2007), Rank and Tuschke (2010) and Tichy and Bennis (2010), which gives support to this organizational perception. The leadership perceived in these case studies is understood as stakeholder interaction, transcending the model of leader-follower. These organizations do not see themselves as islands and are firmly set in society and their environment.

In addition, the current challenge in people management concerns the capacity to create conditions in organizations that lead employees (from the top to the bottom) to have an organizational consciousness of the sustainability induced by new leadership styles. According to Spreitzer *et al.* (2012), there are many reasons for managers to be concerned about human prosperity and the resulting organizational sustainability, leading to employees' commitment to organizations.

New management in organizations should promote a climate where employees feel more likely to prosper, which will bring about other competitive advantages, including the retention of talent which allows human social development, i.e., sustainable leaders, who in turn create sustainable organizations (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2012).

The model of leader's roles is also associated with responsible leadership and concerns corporate business citizenship, which extends beyond philanthropy in all the

firm's business practices. Here, leaders operate with transparency in financial practices, establishing benefits for collaborators, taking advantage of opportunities responsibly, focusing on the positive impact on communities and acting with a view to the future through solidary, socially responsible commitments and based on striving for a better world (Cunha *et al.*, 2007; Maak, 2007; Rego *et al.*, 2007).

Pless (2007, p. 450) states that "a responsible leader is stimulated by a vision based on future values that go beyond commercial considerations, drawing up a wider framework of a desirable state that involves economic, social, human, political and environmental aspects. On one hand this implies a certain degree of humility and modesty, and on the other, an inclination to support others, more specifically stakeholders, to guard their interests and needs".

Briefly, organizations and leaders can promote a happier, more affectively committed workforce if they give a (genuine and sustainable) incentive to positive perceptions in their employees, paying attention to organizational virtuousness. According to Rego and Cunha (2011), a genuinely virtuous individual is one whose virtues become second nature, performing virtuous actions because the desire to practise virtue is part of his mental, emotional and relational software.

5. Conclusions, implications and suggestions for future research

5.1 Conclusions

This study aimed to identify and understand the main dimensions and practices sustaining responsible leaderships. In this framework, the four dimensions explaining this type of leadership identified in the literature review supported the approach to responsible leadership practices in the Portuguese organizations (cases) studied. To attain this objective, a methodology of qualitative research was chosen, i.e., highlighting the individual, the real facts seen and felt by managers, department heads and other collaborators in organizations.

Overall in the cases studied, the organizations presented distinct characteristics. These are organizations integrating relationships which seek human well-being, references of institutions considered as good examples of places to work in and where the best of human nature based on positive management practices is highlighted. The organizations studied, and in particular the *modus operandi* of their responsible leadership, implant dynamics leading to the development of individuals' strengths, resilience and vitality. The emphasis of this style of leadership is mainly on the presence of modern leaders with an integrative and holistic vision of stakeholders, where the focus is on performing the various roles and where virtuousness and ethical values are of determining relevance. Inter-personal relationships, ethical principles regarding the environment, peers and the community were also practices associated with responsible leadership. In orientation of relational leadership, there is no conception of leaders who do not act according to ethical values – a clearly demonstrated dimension in responsible leadership.

The stakeholder perspective suggests that responsible leaders are likely to have a strong sense of values, the importance of the needs and interests of a wide variety of individuals the leader's actions and decisions can affect. In this vision there is an orientation towards values forming responsible leadership. The type of relational leadership orients its action through developing others, through specializing its action and the art of dealing with people. As in Pless (2007), relational leaders are teachers, guardians of ethical values, they are coaches, managing by example, favouring empowerment and obtaining the best from each of their subordinates – elements common to responsible leadership.

The responsible leaders observed in this research demonstrate suitable capacities to attain various objectives, improve cooperation between the parties involved, are concerned about satisfying others' needs, develop long-lasting and friendly relationships that contribute to employee loyalty, resolve complex situations and use emotional and relational intelligence – in line with the studies by Maak and Pless (2006) and Uzzi (1996).

Understanding leadership as a social relational phenomenon, the focus ceases to be leader-subordinate and becomes an analysis of the quality of all the leader's relationships with a set of relevant stakeholders both inside and outside the organization. Here it is recognized that firms operate in an increasingly inter-related and globalized world and have to advance towards more relational forms of interaction with all parties involved in organizations (Gond *et al.*, 2011).

In this connection, responsible leadership is a good framework for relational leaders and the ethical values underlying any of these styles. Similarly, if responsible leadership is oriented towards stakeholders, this type of leader cannot be understood without intrinsic relational qualities.

On the other hand, the followers in the selected organizations are trained to use the best of their ability, in a climate of emotional well-being motivated by leadership possessing recognized virtues, contributing to greater loyalty (Cameron, 2011; Emery *et al.*, 2007; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Panaccio and Vandenberghe, 2009). This orientation focused on people and their positive characteristics, namely, invoking positive organizational values, a positive climate, etc., is shown to help the success of the organizations studied through the greater loyalty of followers. This empirical evidence is in line with the work of Mathieu and Zajac (1990) and Steyrer *et al.* (2008).

This study also concludes that these organizations have a type of leadership able to increase involvement, through employees' personal and social identification with the organization which leads to their greater commitment (Avolio *et al.*, 2003; Meyer *et al.*, 2006). Also of note is the emotional connection of the employees involved, related to making best use of and strengthening their capacities (Zhu *et al.*, 2004), contributing to their well-being and inducing emotional commitment (Meyer *et al.*, 2012) and which they also use to obtain greater social gains (Macdonald *et al.*, 2006). These are values inherent in involvement with the different stakeholders and an allusion to responsible leadership. In this aspect, also of note is the practice of values of CSR and characteristics of sustainability shown in all the organizations studied.

5.2 Theoretical and practical implications

The purpose of this research was to understand the practices supporting the establishment of responsible leadership in organizations. In this way the study forms a lever to stimulate an alternative and constructive way of considering management. Encouraging virtues, nurturing diversity, respecting human dignity, not omitting the search for happiness, promoting a positive organizational climate – aspects which if encouraged could result in desirable consequences, both for individuals and organizations.

In theoretical terms, this research also outlines a new vision of leadership in organizations – responsible leadership. Specifically, the intention was to define contributions for understanding the responsible leadership found in the organizations analysed. The research can be considered as innovative, contributing to deeper study of this subject, opening up numerous paths for theoretical development, whatever the context dealt with.

This study was relevant for identification of the dimensions characterizing responsible leadership style. These dimensions are able to explain the reasons for collaborator commitment in positive organizations. Specifically, it was also the intention to explain contributions towards understanding this new leadership style found in the organizations analysed.

The study also sought to reinforce and transmit better knowledge of this leadership's link with organizational commitment, i.e., why employees are consistently faithful to these organizations backed up by models of responsible leadership.

In practical terms, this study highlighted various dimensions and practices which if stimulated and instigated as distinctive characteristics of modern leaders, could have a positive impact on their followers and organizations, even in a macroeconomic context with clear restrictions. The results obtained with this research could also induce usability, particularly in the business world seeking retention of the best talents which add value to organizations in an extremely complex environment worldwide.

It is believed that the practices found, crucial in the responsible style of leadership, could form a clear orientation for top management, as they can be learned and help to create better places to work in. Therefore, the aim was also that this study should contribute to improved quality of management/leadership in Portugal.

Our study also contributes to more knowledge about organizations that follow a responsible style of leadership, and in so doing form consistent practices that can represent benchmarking for other organizational structures, even taking into account the natural idiosyncrasies inherent in the Portuguese organizational and business sector (e.g. excess of individualism, lack of associative spirit, insufficient stimulants for entrepreneurship).

From a more daring perspective and considering the studies by Lopes (2009), Spreitzer (2007) and Voegtlin *et al.* (2011), this research allows consideration of these forms of leadership as having characteristics and capacity to help society develop. This is an appreciation that understands leadership through the use of responsible organizational practices that can solve conflicts and promote more peaceful societies in the globalized era.

5.3 *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

It should be noted that this study has some limitations. First, this was a thorough and time-consuming qualitative investigation which could have included study of a greater number of organizations. However, for reasons to do with treatment of the information gathered, it was not considered possible to increase the number of organizations studied without resorting to quantitative methodology. We believe that combination of a qualitative study (essential with regard to the intended aim) and quantitative research covering a larger number of organizations, could enrich the information gathered and give results of reinforced validity and consistency.

Second, the study cannot be generalized, due to its "case study" nature (Yin, 2009). Therefore, because of the restrictions inherent in qualitative research (preventing a wider geographical and sectorial study), only with caution can conclusions be inferred for a wider organizational context.

Due to these limitations, carrying out wider and more transversal studies, for example, organizations in a given sector of activity could be a fruitful field of research. We also consider it would be relevant to gain knowledge of the impacting factors of responsible leadership that lead followers not to accept the dominant organizational commitment. Another suggestion for future research could be based on the inherent

dimensions of responsible leadership in the private sector, compared to organizations in the public sector. In addition, a future longitudinal study analysing the organizations studied in their clearest dimensions over time, could provide worthwhile inferences.

Finally, we hope that this study has opened up new vistas on responsible leadership and paved the way for future research in this direction.

Note

1. Social Norm 8000 of Social Accountability International.

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