



# THE CULTURE & PRACTICE CONVERGENCE: LOOKING FOR WAYS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

## Introduction

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Thirty years ago, the Earth Summit gathering in Rio de Janeiro held host to world leaders, setting a blueprint for a more secure future by balancing economic growth and ecological necessity. Created for member states to cooperate in response to worldwide development issues, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) sought to address these challenges and achieved a global consensus on the priorities for a new development agenda (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Earth Summit, n.d.) As sustainability issues encompassed the whole of the planet, the summit provided a platform for member states to collaborate towards sustainability goals. This was a call to break away from the old economic model, which has paved the way for ecological disasters. It was time for a new economic model that, as the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon described as sustainable development (Millar & Gitsham, 2013). The concept of sustainable development for a secure future has made some impacts in shaping the contemporary political, societal, and business landscapes. Thirty years later, the challenges of businesses in balancing the differentials between the quality of life and resource scarcity are still to reach a point of universal adaptation to secure this future. The recent COVID-19 global crisis is a case in point that necessitates this secure future in the face of uncertainties and the vital role of business. This gives researchers a motive to investigate what business is and its purpose and to understand practical mechanisms throughout different levels to improve the current situation.

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This brief review focuses on the dimension of Organizational Culture as one such mechanism that may foster sustainability practices in business, serving as a preliminary look wherein future investigations may be guided. Organizational culture has been identified as a critical factor in the success of business activity, including that of sustainability. (Piwowar-Sulej, 2020). It is the people who make up that organization that drives what its purpose is mandated to be. While gatherings of world leaders hundreds of thousands of kilometers away may be guiding us to move toward sustainability, the first steps, as they say, starts at home.

While there has been a relatively well-developed body of literature on the nature and challenges around sustainability, what is lacking is the implications for practice within organizations (Millar & Gitsham, 2013; Johnstone, 2018 cited by Fietz & Gunther, 2021). This dearth of discussion has led to the acceptance of business leaders of sustainability as a new stage of competition and performance as more leaders indicate it as a necessary component of the business core, yet at the same time, challenges in implementation within the organization are still significant as to slow the momentum of the concept of sustainability as practice. Global upheavals such as the recent pandemic remind us that studies in this area need to be continually made and developed. This paper hopes to contribute to this need by discussing extant literature on organizational culture and sustainability practices which may pave the way for the development of more focused research. The road toward sustainability has been wrought with challenges. The barriers and facilitators towards corporate sustainability practices have been a point of various research agendas. This study hopes to further the understanding of the role of organizational culture in significantly driving business actions toward sustainability practices. The literature presented here outlines the mechanisms which affect the factors which may lead to a green culture that may precede a more active and practical implementation of sustainable practices within organizations.

These various articles are presented in the hopes of providing researchers with possible perspectives on tackling the organizational culture/corporate sustainability practice dynamic for future investigations as well as to open further discussions.

## Review of Literature

### Organizational Culture

The success of ecologically sustainable organizational practices has been argued to be dependent on the institutional of environmental beliefs and processes into the core values of the organizations themselves (Purser, 1994; Jennings & Zandergen, 1995, cited by Crane & Harris, 2001; Fietz & Gunther, 2021). As we look at sustainability as a systems-based entity, the dimension of the organizational culture is a significant contributor to that system. "Organizational culture can be defined as a) a pattern of basic assumptions, b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, d) which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, e) therefore, is to be taught to new members as the f) the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about those problems" (Schein, 1990, p. 114). Organizational culture is interdisciplinary, encompassing intersections between organizational theory, sociology, psychology, management, and anthropology (Gonzalez, 1987, cited by Teehankee, 1993). Organizational culture provides substantial interest in its influence on long-term organizational activities, which are directed by shared values and meanings. "As an approach to organizational improvement, organizational culture encourages a long-term view of organizational success against the myriad short-term approaches in management" (Teehankee, 1993). A distinctly strong culture leads to successful performance through Common and deeply held beliefs and values manifesting itself through characteristics such as a high level of shared meanings, a common vision, a "clan-like" attitude among its members, pride in the work, and a sense of belonging in the institution, and a high level of behavior integration (Gonzalez, 1987:42 cited by Teehankee, 1993)".

### The Greening of Organizational Change

The arduous task of consciously and effectively moving towards sustainable corporate practices is a complicated matter. The repeated arguments state that organizational actions need to go beyond technical fixes and move towards environmentally responsible beliefs, values, and behaviors. This calls on the role of organizational culture as the main driver toward green management or sustainability actions. Harris and Crane

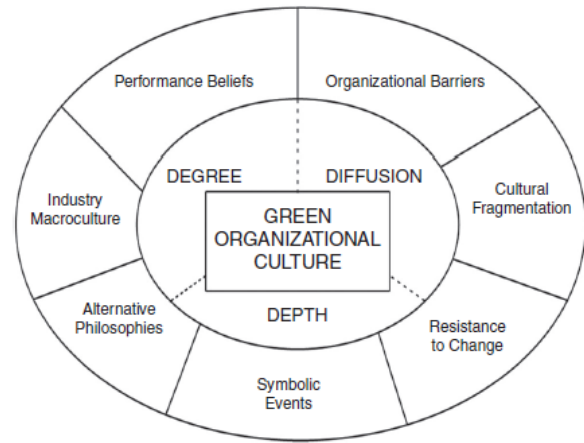
(2001) sought to explore the potential barriers and facilitators within the organizational culture which may influence the success or otherwise of organizations making headways into environmentally responsible sustainability practices. The examination of the underlying development of an organization has been a key area of study in other forms of management orientation such as total quality management, and market orientation (Harris & Crane, 2000). The authors sought to address that empirical evidence has been so far absent in support of corporate sustainability being dependent on green culture change. The main purpose of the article is twofold: to provide qualitative evidence of the extent of perception managers have towards a greening of organizational culture, and the identification and exploration of factors that managers view as facilitators or barriers to organizational change towards green culture. The article found that there are three data-driven dimensions of cultural greening: Depth, Degree, and Diffusion. "The degree of cultural greening pertains to how deeply managers perceived greening to be valued by various organizational members and factions, while the degree of cultural greening refers to the extent to which managers felt that green values and sensibilities were manifested in organizational creations and artifacts...the diffusion of cultural greening applies to how widely managers believed these feelings and behaviors to be exhibited throughout the organization" (Harris & Crane, 2001, p. 11). The qualitative study reveals that these dimensions are affected by various factors within the culture of an organization, accounting for cultural greening. While their findings did not propose to suggest definitive causal links, these factors, as evidenced by the data gathered serve as a guide for the readers to consider and which may be utilized for further study.

*Performance beliefs*, which were found to be the most common factor influencing the degree of cultural greening by the manager-respondents, is the perception of the practice of sustainable growth and its effects on traditional performance measures. This indicated that most of the managers still think of short-term returns when considering green practices. *Industry macro-cultures* as a factor indicating that susceptibility towards greening organizational culture is influenced by the macro environment the organization is a part of. *Organizational barriers* range from systems, behaviors, and structures within the organization. Some examples of these are

centralized decision-making, the focus on information systems, inter-functional coordination, and structural diversity. These barriers entail that significant maneuvering is needed by change agents toward green organizational culture through political tactics. *Symbolic events* pertain to symbolic actions and events, symbols as perceived by organizational members. These have a pervasive effect on embedding and strengthening sustainable values within the corporate culture. *Alternative philosophies* refer to the extent a cultural emphasis is perceived to be placed on alternative or conflicting philosophies (Harris and Crane, 2002). *Cultural fragmentation* refers to the presence of subcultures in the organization, and their size and power to impact the diffusion of sustainability values. It may also be referred to as the cultural landscape apparent in the organization. *Resistance to change* indicates the defiance of challenges towards the status quo or a traditionally accepted method or process. Resistance in the perception of organization members that these changes may only be a "management fad".

Harris and Crane sought to highlight the dangers of over-simplifying organizational culture based on ideal and or unitary green cultures, indicating that mechanisms deep with the culture of an organization must be taken into account for organizations to move towards green and sustainable practices. Their study identifies potential impediments in terms of cultural greening in an organization which guides us to look at factors inherent in the different levels of the organization such as the individual, organizational, and industry levels. For green sustainability change agents, this poses the task they have to undertake. Crane and Harris recommend that these agents may benefit from engaging in political maneuvering for them to advance their causes in the face of these factors.

**Figure 1.**  
*Depth, degree, and diffusion of organizational greening*



Source: Harris and Crane (2002)

Harris and Crane's findings regarding the facilitators and barriers of green organizational culture were revisited fifteen years later through a study in 2016 by Porter, Lawong, and Gallagher. The researchers sought to replicate Harris and Crane's research. The facilitators and barriers as well as the factors were supported to be relevant after this revisiting of Harris and Crane's initial study. As with the original study, Performance beliefs were still a significant factor in affecting the barriers or facilitation of green culture or sustainability perceptions. The manager's perspective, an indication, or a byproduct of organizational culture is still focused on the bottom line. This is apparent as it was the most mentioned in the report by the respondents of Porter et al. Fifteen years later, the facilitators and barriers to a green organizational culture remain relatively unchanged with change agents still struggling with these same aspects. While the original study by Harris and Crane painted a bleak picture regarding sustainability initiatives in organizations, the more recent study presents a more hopeful perspective in that fifteen years later, organizations appear to have progressed in regards to sustainability. The study conducted fifteen years later, however, found that participants were more enthusiastic, highly driven, and passionate in creating a sustainable culture, through various levels of management. Respondents saw sustainability and care for the environment as important aspects of their lives. They see the importance of incorporating these into their professional lives

(Alignment and fit between individual and organization). This may be because of the significant gaps between the generation of fifteen years ago and the current generation, as well as more symbolic events that have permeated popular culture concerning the importance of sustainability to the planet and society.

In more recent studies measuring the dimensions and factors of Green Organizational Culture (GOC) toward questionnaire development, Aggarwal & Agarwala (2021) built on the theoretical framework of Harris and Crane thereby giving them a suitable perspective on the concept's current relevance. In developing a quantitative measure for the assessment of green culture in an organization, the authors have been able to confirm Harris and Crane's model as applicable to measure and study green organization culture in organizations in different contexts (Aggarwal & Agarwala, 2021).

The degree dimensions of Performance beliefs & Industry Macro-factor that relate to the degree dimension and imply that managers recognize whether green values have been internalized within organizational artifacts were confirmed. Their study was also able to link alternative business philosophies with the degree dimension, indicating that in the context of more organizations giving importance to the environment, the desire of organizations to shift from traditional profit-oriented to broader dimensions of sustainability into their business philosophy (Aggarwal & Agarwala, 2021). The diffusion dimension characterized by organization barriers, cultural fragmentation, individual, and resistance to change is likewise confirmed by Aggarwal & Agarwala indicating that employee beliefs and motivation towards greening will manifest across the organization yet can still be subjected to barriers such as subcultures and their relative power within the firm (Aggarwal & Agarwala, 2021). Lastly, the depth dimension (characterized through symbolic events, alternate business philosophies, and individual resistance to change) is confirmed to be very much relevant as symbolic events and actions within an organization regarding greening lead to overall green culture commitment and green consciousness and its prevalence can determine responses to green initiatives.

The confirmation of GOC dimensions of degree,

diffusion, and depth characterized by their various factors has enabled the development of a standardized and empirically validated instrument to measure the degree green values are internalized in organizations. The measurement of green organizational culture has significant implications for creating and reinforcing greening through human resource management initiatives and policies (Aggarwal & Agarwala, 2021).

### *The Role of Employee Empathy In Driving Pro-Environmental Behavior*

Islam, Ali, and Asad (2018) touch on how organizations may apply practices towards building a green organizational culture towards sustainability through CSR which aligns employees to organizational identification. The significance of the individual in alignment with organizational culture through symbolic events such as CSR practices is also considered in this study wherein the role of empathy in the individual (employee) has an effect on pro-environmental behavior within the organization. Empathy, a concept that describes how people internalize and process the feelings of the people they encounter (Islam et al., 2018). The psychology of empathy posits that employees with a high level of empathy are more predisposed to modify their actions to support societal concerns in helping others (Islam et al., 2018). This article positions that the harnessing of employee empathy as a source of moral engagement can be utilized to increase ethical behavior or more specifically pro-environmental behavior in employees. The article explores how organizations promote CSR-related pro-environmental behavior (PEB), as well as the roles that employee empathy and levels of organizational identification (OI) play in employees' engagement with environmental issues in the workplace context.

Organizational identification is seen as the level at which employees align themselves psychologically to the exuded values of the organization that they work for (Islam et al., 2018). This may be in symbolic events such as CSR activity as perceived by potential new hires in the recruitment stage. As these symbolic events may affect the perception of individuals towards the company and positively affect potential new hires and existing employees. This may have a boosting effect on employees personally by boosting their self-esteem working for a company with

evidence of CSR activities, growing their capacity to generate pride in the organization (Annals) therefore, creating inroads for individuals to align themselves with the values of the company which is dependent on the levels of empathy the individual. The study uncovered the following relationships: (1) Company CSR activity perceived by employees has a positive effect on Organizational Identity (2) The relationship between CSR and OI is affected by employee empathy levels (3) OI is positively associated with pro-environment behavior (PEB). The findings provide managers understanding of how a position of reciprocal behavior in employees is arrived at to strategically influence pro-environmental behavior. The building of empathy among employees of the organization may be fostered by constant communication of the organization's CSR activities to employees, and including the employees as much as possible in these activities. On the organizational level, the communication of pro-environmental behavior can be done through workshops and meetings which espouse the explored range of performance and engagement-related benefits (). The authors also recommend the investment of organizations in empathy training for its members to elevate empathy levels which can be adopted in their work.

### *Pro-environmental Organizational Culture: Its Essence and a Concept for its Operationalization*

While the literature so far presented has contributed to the illumination of factors that influence employee's pro-environmental behavior, environmental sustainability in the context of organizational culture has, as of date, received comparatively little attention. Piwovar-Sulej (2020) has addressed this gap and sought to contribute to the area of organizational culture by defining its essence and its context for operationalization toward pro-environmental culture and sustainability. This article posits that the concept levels of pro-environmental culture and its corresponding measurement have yet to be developed, thus the research aim of presenting the concept of a pro-environmental organizational culture and its operationalization to support the achievement of sustainability goals (Piwovar-Sulej, 2020). The paper distinguished elements for the analysis of pro-environmental culture as guided by Schein's model where individual components of organizational culture can be

determined based on two criteria: the degree to which the members of the organization are aware, and the ease of observation. The criteria are further grouped into three levels: norms and values, basic assumptions, and artifacts (Piwovar-Sulej, 2020). Factors that influence organizational culture were also taken into consideration such as Duaber et al.'s organizational strategy, structure, and operations as the internal environment. The holistic levels were ascertained through four subsections for pro-environmental levels such as (1) company policy and practices, (2) responsibility for environmental issues, and (4) employee attitudes and employee behaviors. The study's results aimed at diagnosing and understanding the mechanisms of Pro-environmental culture in an organization to assess its condition and formulate recommendations on how it can be changed. The study operationalized the essence of pro-environmental culture for diagnosis and assigning pro-environmental culture to a certain level by developing an instrument that can assist managers. This study provides practical tools for managers to gauge the landscape of their own pro-environmental culture as a diagnosis of any situation is an important consideration before looking into strategies for organizational culture change.

### *Differentiating Corporate Sustainability from Corporate Responsibility*

Pratima Bansal and Hee-Chan Song (2017) sought to explore the current blurring of the concepts of responsibility and sustainability in contemporary research. They argue that managers and researchers now use the words responsibility and sustainability interchangeably, inconsistently, and ambiguously (Bansal and Song, 2020). This current intertwining of the concepts, most commonly rooted in the rationalization of the business case for both may prove detrimental in the development of research in the respective field as a consensual research agenda is needed to aid their development to guide what is solved and how. This blurring between responsibility and sustainability has inadvertently stunted growth and caused confusion in the field.

This ambiguous blurring of the distinctions between responsibility and sustainability has ultimately manifested itself in the overlap of four dimensions: (1) construct definitions, (2) ontological assumptions, (3) nomological

networks, and (4) construct measurements. To highlight the distinctions between the two a return to the traditional conceptualization is given through a review of the literature. Responsibility studies expressed concerns regarding social issues such as labor disputes, consumer issues, gender inequality, and fair trade among others. This tradition is based on the foundation of shareholder value versus stakeholder rights Sustainability, on the other hand, traces its roots to studies focused on environmental issues and ecological management wherein sustainability contrasts environmental protection and economic development.

The study calls for a return to form, from which responsibility and sustainability research can base their concepts to strengthen their arguments on each concept's merits and foundations rather than falling back into supporting one concept with another which only serves to further blur the lines between them. This calls for responsibility to take on research through the lens of the normative perspective. That of morality, obligation, and social duty of managers. On the other hand, a systems perspective approach is proposed to take on sustainability research, in the concepts of interconnectivity of systems and holism. The research into these fields grounded in their foundational conceptualization will only serve to strengthen their distinctive merits and lead to further development. While the call for distinction is apparent, this is not to say that responsibility and sustainability cannot complement and inform each other. The paper only calls for the overly dependent intertwining of these two to strengthen their rationalization which leads to ambiguousness and hinders development in the respective fields of studies. Indeed, the authors present strategies for researchers to complement the concepts with each other while keeping true to their inherent distinctions such as Practical Syllogism (Mothersill, 1962, cited by Bansal & Song, 2020), Paradox Perspective, and focusing on the intersection between business and society. The article advocates for shelving away from the industrial-capitalist concept of the likes of neo-classical economists Friedman (1970) and Freeman (1995) which separates economics and normative ethics. Bansal and Song advocate the ontological definition of what business is and its purpose. The literature review they have presented that we are moving away from the industrial-capitalist view of

economic profit and that the purpose of business is social justice. This normative stance informs their research which has led to the article in discussion. The risks of blurring the lines between responsibility and sustainability are that amorality may stem from the adaptation of sustainability practices because of systems-based rationality or economic benefits. The focus on responsibility for its strengths is a normative stance that advocates that ethics and morality (responsibility) serve as the compass for business, with science (sustainability) as its engine. Responsibility based on ethical principles guides research toward organizational relationships with society, which may serve to further research in changing organizational culture towards sustainability practices. As mentioned by the authors, researchers may look into the account of a consensus for normative behavior or values, guidance to future leaders, and responding to the context which may prove helpful in research for organizational changes in culture towards a green culture. This along with the systems perspective of holism, inter-connectiveness, and the long run, may be significant avenues to explore in changing organizational culture.

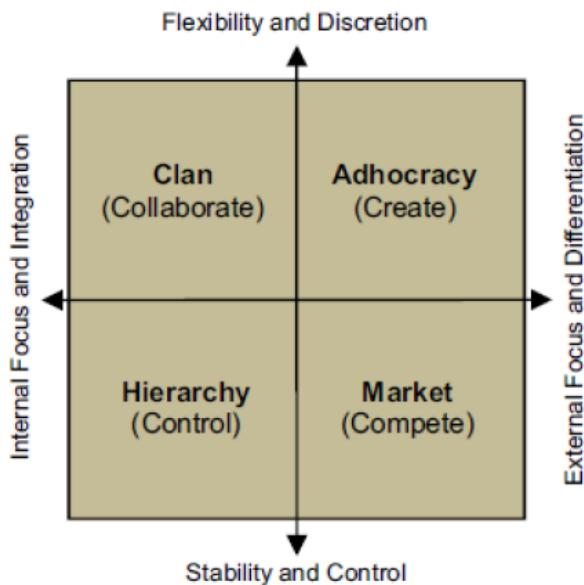
### *Organizational Culture and Sustainability*

As organizational culture is contextual, a case study on a Brazilian electric company by Soares, Oliva, Kubo, Parente, and Tanaka (2018) is included here to provide insights of looking into each organization's contextual culture. The researchers assessed the relationship between cultural profiles and the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of the organization. Soares et al. utilized the cultural typology model developed by Cameron and Quinn to focus on organizational cultural profiles in their assessment. The profiles as developed by Cameron and Quinn include hierarchical, rational, innovative, and clan. The authors sought to provide evidence that attested to a strong positive relation between balanced culture (balance between the different typologies) and the total mean of reported indicators in the GRI sustainability report.

*Clan culture* refers to a cultural typology that represents an organization that is more internally focused. It is named thus because of its similarity to a family, in that it looks more like an extension of the family rather than an economic institution. It can be described as a more collaborative cultural typology. *Market culture* is a more

competitively driven typology. It operates with market mechanisms that help guarantee success in market participation and leadership. It refers to a flexible externally focused organization where members work towards the same goal: winning. It is characterized by a focus on results and the presence of strict leaders. *Adhocratic culture*, flexible and externally focused is characterized by its recognition and fostering of adaptation and innovation. Amongst the other three typologies, it can be relatively characterized as being more creative, emphasizing innovation which leads to new resources and profitability, creation of a view of the future. *Hierarchical culture* refers to a more stable and internally-focused organizational typology (control). The environment is formal and structured with the maintenance of regularity as essential for stability. The long-term concept relies on stability, predictability, and efficiency, and the formal rules and policies maintain the organization together.

**Figure 2.**  
*Cultural typology*



Source: Cameron and Quinn (2011, p. 39)

The study assessed the cultural profiles of various Brazilian companies and compared these with the corresponding GRI indicators reported by each. Utilizing

the competing values framework by Cameron and Quinn (2006) as a theoretical base, (figure 2) the study provides a clearer perspective on the relationships between these companies' cultural profiles and the economic, environmental, and social dimensions (the 3BL approach). The results showed that a greater correlation existed between a balanced culture and the total value of reported indicators than that of a non-balanced culture. (Soares et al., 2018). This suggests that companies with an overall balanced cultural profile encompassing the clan (collaboration), adhocratic (creation), market (competition), and hierarchical (control) dimensions are in a better position to be able to improve organization sustainability goals. The study implies that towards the goal of better sustainability practices as manifested in reported indicators, it is recommended that companies also assess their cultural profiles to identify whether there is an imbalance in the cultural dimensions. Doing so may bring into light areas of improvement which can be addressed within the organization. Reporting sustainability practices has mostly been regarded as a tallying of outputs or results through indicators. The study's perspective places the role of the people and culture of the organizations themselves as vital components for sustainability goals to be achieved. Within-organization strategies for fostering the different cultural dimensions as appropriate may be developed and integrated into various policy-making.

### *The role of management development in achieving a culture change toward sustainability in the organization*

The link between management development and sustainability-driven change is discussed by Millar and Gitsham (2013) to contribute to the literature regarding implications for practice within organizations. Management development and learning within organizations and across business schools serve an important role to address the sustainability-driven need for organizational culture change. This position stresses the importance of how management development and business schools can better prepare future leaders to enable them to develop new ways of thinking and new business models to ensure the sustainability of their businesses (Millar and Gitsham, 2013). The significance of management development in sustainability is further given prominence through the outcomes document of the 2012+20 Earth Summit where the following three arguments were outlined: (1) the promotion of education for sustainable



development and to integrate it into education beyond the Decade for Sustainable Development, (2) Encouraging educational institutions to consider adopting good practices in sustainability in the campuses and communities, and (3) the underscoring of the importance of supporting educational institutions to carry out research and innovation for sustainable development (Millar & Gitsham, 2013).

These arguments have led to the integration of sustainability into management development curricula, weaving into disciplines such as strategy, finance, marketing, human resources, and other mainstays of a conventional MBA curriculum (Millar & Gitsham, 2013). Integrating sustainability into these areas is not without its challenges regarding the development of pedagogical approaches that address unique questions that are bound to surface out of integration into the various disciplines. It is then critical, to combine "cognitive learning with powerful emotional engagements to move from awareness-raising to the kind of commitment to doing things differently that genuinely helps create organizational change" (Millar & Gitsham, 2013 p. 5). The authors argue that there is a need for further research in three important areas: (1) the role of management development, (2) approaches and tools for management development (3) business schools, and the sustainability curriculum. These areas indicate important aspects of preparing future business leaders to successfully interweave sustainability into management practices, embedding it into their values and styles thereby approaching their roles in affecting or developing sustainability culture in their organizations.

### Conclusions

The articles presented the significance of a strong organizational culture angled towards pro-environmental or green concepts as a driver for the practical implementation of sustainable practices. While the concept of sustainability as an organizational goal has been comparatively covered in the literature, a perspective that causes managers to look into the factors affecting mechanisms for cultural change in the face of a shared vision for sustainability is a welcome field of study for further investigation. This review of literature provides various perspectives to provide inroads for managers to recognize the importance of organizational culture and

look towards mechanisms that may further the agenda of a sustainable future by looking at the factors which affect the dimensions of organizational greening through the various levels of the organization. On the individual level, it is empathy that is found to have an impact on how employees are pre-disposed to pro-environmental behavior and sustainability goals. This may provide managers with insights into the recruitment of human resources, as well as strengthening spear-headed organizational mandates through symbolic events. The goal of a sustainable future may be tackled by looking at how the concepts of culture and sustainability are operationalized as seen through the different levels of the organization: the individual, the organizational, and the industry macro-environment.

The argument for the call for distinctiveness between responsibility and sustainability poses a challenge for researchers in these fields to further their conceptualizations by being rooted in their distinctive merits and purposes. This leads to more creative and new research strands emerging and contributes to the growth of the fields. While sustainability and responsibility are nonetheless intertwined and overlap in various aspects, each must be given a focused scope that only serves to strengthen each. The strengthening of arguments towards cultural change for sustainability may be further supported by either a normative or sustainability perspective. This gives researchers and change agents solid foundations in furthering their goals toward sustainability. The challenge of securing a sustainable future is daunting. Research plays a crucial role in contributing to the body of knowledge from which organizations may draw practical enlightenment toward their own sustainability goals. The field of organizational culture and its place in reaching those goals must be developed especially towards this agenda.

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