
Role of Responsible Leadership In Sustainable Performance: Mediating Role of Workplace Flexibility

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Abstract

As the organisations become more conscious about ethical responsibility, stakeholder interests, employee welfare and sustainable performance, the responsible leadership has become a major issue. Based upon stakeholder theory and social exchange logic, this study explores the role of workplace flexibility as a mediator while studying the responses of 322 faculty members in higher institutions from 344 questionnaires filled from the institutions in KP, in southern region of Pakistan. correlation, regression and mediation analysis were performed. The results indicate that there were significant positive relationships between responsible leadership and workplace flexibility ($r = .449, p < .001$), responsible leadership and performance ($r = .542, p < .001$) and workplace flexibility and sustainable performance ($r = .498, p < .001$). Responsible leadership was significant predictor of workplace flexibility ($B = .3887, p < .001$), workplace flexibility was a significant predictor of sustainable performance, controlling for responsible leadership ($B = .2985, p < .001$). Also, responsible leadership was an important predictor of sustainable performance both prior to ($B = .4388$) and following ($B = .3228$) the workplace flexibility factor, providing some evidence of partial mediation. The results reveal workplace flexibility as an important mechanism connecting responsible leadership to sustainable performance in the higher education.

Keywords: Responsible Leadership, Workplace Flexibility, Sustainable Performance, Higher Education & Mediation

Introduction

The placing of a greater emphasis on long-term value for money for employees, institutions and stakeholders as well as short term financial results is on the rise, and leadership plays an important role in this transition. The responsible leadership views leadership as an ethical, relational process that involves not only the leaders and followers, but also other stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006; Doh & Quigley, 2014), informed by the Freeman's (1984) theory of the stakeholders and fact that incorporating CSR and managerial discretion into decisions enhances sustainability (Amir et al., 2022). Voegtlin et al. (2020) proposed the concept of responsible leadership that comprises three roles: expert, facilitator and citizen; where employee needs, societal consequences and organizational goals are taken into account, particularly in higher education institutions which is the importance of ethical leadership and inclusive and flexible organizational policies. Sustainable performance embodies this broad perspective of success with a balance of economic, social, environmental and organizational outcome over a period of particular time.

The leadership is one of the studied antecedents for sustainable performance (Boeske, 2023; Gaybullaev &

Strode, 2026) that works through pathways like sustainable HRM (Nakra & Kashyap, 2024), environmental management (Rehman et al., 2023), environmental innovation (Liao & Zhang, 2020), and knowledge-sharing (Wei et al., 2022; Piwowar & Iqbal, 2023). In Pakistan, responsible leadership is positively related to sustainable performance of public-sector employees (Huo et al., 2023) and triple-bottom-line performance of managers (Javed et al., 2020). How responsible leadership translates into outcomes remains unclear. A possible mechanism is flexibility in the workplace. In this linking, flexibility-oriented practices increase engagement and performance (Bal & De Lange, 2015; Davidescu et al., 2020; Naqshbandi et al., 2023), strategic and human resource flexibility increase firm performance (Xiu et al., 2017; Pahi et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2026), as well as flexibility increases innovative work behavior (Octaviana et al., 2025). The aim of this research is to examine if there is a mediating role of workplace flexibility between responsible leadership and sustainable performance for higher education workforces.

Literature Review

Responsible Leadership & Sustainable Performance

Sustainable performance needs results that are achieved over time and not by the expense of the employee or the institution. Theoretically, responsible leadership is aligned with this goal because it has a long-term perspective, makes ethical decisions and interacts with stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2020; Doh & Quigley, 2014). It has been associated with the TBL performance of managers in Pakistan (Javed et al., 2020), sustainable performance of public-sector employees in Pakistan (Huo et al., 2023), sustainable performance via sustainable HRM (Nakra & Kashyap, 2024) and via knowledge-sharing (Wei et al., 2022). Responsible leadership has a direct impact on sustainable performance since leaders determine the vision, strategies, and practices of operations in which universities operate and develop in the long run. It is associated with improving sustainability via CSR and managerial discretion (Amir et al., 2022), environmental innovation and performance (Liao & Zhang, 2020), financial and environmental performance (Rehman et al., 2023) and it is explained as the triple bottom line imperative (Abraham, 2024).

H1: Responsible leadership has significant positive relationship with sustainable performance.

Responsible Leadership & Workplace Flexibility

The work conditions may also be influenced by responsible leadership; the facilitator aspect of responsible leadership refers to the caring for employees dimension which are considered as internal stakeholders and should have an influence on organisational decisions (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2020). This is consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the notion that employees return the goodwill of their supportive bosses (Cropanzano et al., 2017), with flexible working being one manifestation of goodwill. The sustainable performance in organizations is capacity to ensure that productivity, effectiveness, and competitiveness are high over a period of time without overworking human as well as the organizational resources. Empowering leadership enhances flexible HRM – performance relationship (Pahi et al., 2023), and flexible HRM – ambidexterity of employees (Islam et al., 2026). In this connection, when effectively applied, workplace flexibility can play a major role in sustainable performance by increasing engagement, increasing productivity, as well as ensuring the ongoing institutional development and success.

H2: Responsible leadership has a significant positive relationship with workplace flexibility.

Workplace Flexibility and Sustainable Performance

The workplace flexibility helps to coordinate the work demands and shifting of the tasks, which contributes to performance. The flexibility human resource management is correlated with the engagement and job performance (Bal & De Lange, 2015) and flexible time/workspaces are part of sustainable HRM (Davidescu et al., 2020). Flexibility is shown to increase performance in higher education through work engagement (Naqshbandi et al., 2023), as well as strategic flexibility and innovative HR practices are found to increase

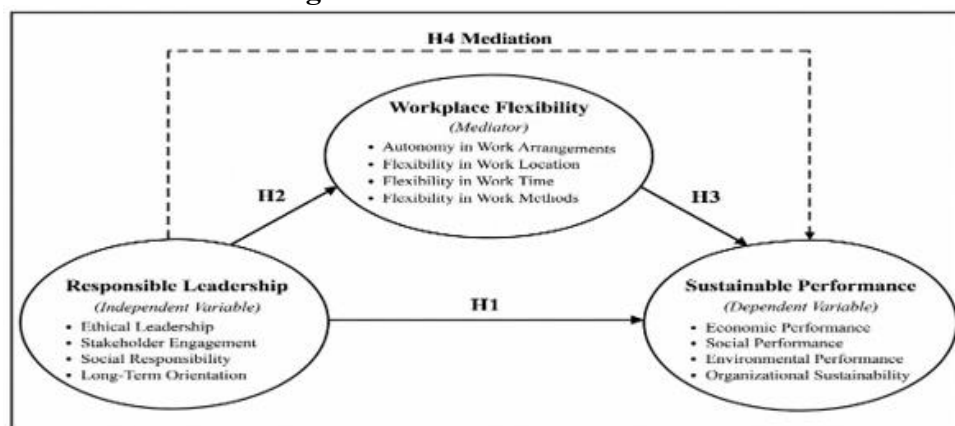
firm performance (Xiu et al., 2017), and flexibility-oriented HRM is seen to increase sustainability performance through the mediating variable of employee ambidexterity the well-being of an individual (Islam et al., 2026), and positive correlation between flexibility and innovative work behavior (Octaviana et al., 2025). This feeling of trust leads to the increasing responsibility of the people towards their work and excellence in their work. In the absence of the conducive working conditions, such pressures may cause stress, fatigue and burnout, which eventually diminishes productivity and organizational effectiveness. H3: Workplace flexibility has a significant positive relationship with sustainable performance.

Mediating Role of Workplace Flexibility

All of these points point to the role of responsible leadership and the importance of creating conditions conducive to sustainable performance that, in part, involve the workplace flexibility where leaders who are sensitive to well-being of their employees may create flexible working conditions that keep employees engaged and productive. This aligns with social exchange theory in which fair signal by leadership is rewarded with employees' contribution (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Through these novel practices, institutions come up with new strategies, enhance operational processes and effective in responding to new challenges. Flexibility at workplace also enhances cooperation and communication at workplace, which is the key to development of organizations. The other significant feature of flexibility in the is that it helps in attracting and maintaining great professionals. Flexibility is similar mechanism mediated by mechanisms such as sustainable HRM (Nakra & Kashyap, 2024), knowledge sharing (Wei et al., 2022), environmental management (Rehman et al., 2023), digital culture (Shin et al., 2023) and well-being (Ahsan & Khawaja, 2024).

H4: Workplace flexibility mediates relationship amid responsible leadership and performance.

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework



Research Methodology

The hypotheses were examined using quantitative, cross sectional survey with faculty of higher education institutions in southern KP, Pakistan (N = 2444). Using the formula of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) with 5% margin of error, required sample size was ~344. Of 344 questionnaires distributed, 322 usable responses were analyzed: 222 male (68.9%), 100 female (31.1%); 188 (58.4%) held MPhil degrees, 134 (41.6%) held PhD degrees; 182 (56.5%) were local residents, 140 (43.5%) non-local.

Research Measures

A structured questionnaire was used to obtain data, which was a modified version of existing questionnaires on the five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The responsible leadership was

assessed with a stakeholder-oriented scale (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2020); workplace flexibility was measured by means of items reflect flexible arrangements (Davidescu et al., 2020) while sustainable performance was assessed by means of established longer-term indicators. Other variables in the overall research design were not included in measures.

Data Analysis

Study variables and characteristics of the respondents were presented in descriptive statistics. The bivariate relationships were explored using Pearson correlations and the direct effects for mediation were estimated using regression with Baron and Kenny's (1986) causal-steps logic, as expanded in conditional process analysis (Hayes, 2013). Mediation was evaluated using the responsible leadership's direct effect on the workplace flexibility, direct effect of workplace flexibility on sustainable performance controlling for responsible leadership, and changes in the responsible-leadership coefficient after workplace flexibility was added for attaining the desired outcomes.

Results of Study

The mean scores for both employee's work perceptions of responsible leadership ($M = 3.2614$, $SD = .79188$), workplace flexibility ($M = 3.3804$, $SD = .68519$), and sustainable performance ($M = 3.3866$, $SD = .64102$) were above the 3-point mid-point on the five-point scales (Table 1) in the study.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Responsible Leadership	322	1.30	4.00	3.2614	.79188
Workplace Flexibility	322	1.70	4.00	3.3804	.68519
Sustainable Performance	322	1.63	4.00	3.3866	.64102

Correlation Analysis

Preliminary support for H1, H2, and H3 was found as responsible leadership was positively correlated with workplace flexibility ($r = .449$, $p < .001$) and sustainable performance ($r = .542$, $p < .001$) while workplace flexibility was positively correlated with performance ($r = .498$, $p < .001$) (Table 2).

Table 2 Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Responsible Leadership	1	.449**	.542**
2. Workplace Flexibility	.449**	1	.498**
3. Sustainable Performance	.542**	.498**	1

Note. $N = 322$. ** $p < .01$.

Regression and Mediation Analysis

Responsible leadership significantly predicted workplace flexibility ($B = .3887$, $SE = .0483$, $t = 8.0491$, $p < .001$), explaining 20.18% of its variance ($R^2 = .2018$), supporting H2 in current research study.

Table 3 Regression of Responsible Leadership on Workplace Flexibility

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	2.1128	.1521	13.8868	< .001
Responsible Leadership	.3887	.0483	8.0491	< .001

Model: $R = .4492$; $R^2 = .2018$; $F(1, 320) = 64.7874$, $p < .001$.

When responsible leadership was added to the model, workplace flexibility was a significant predictor of the sustainable performance ($B = .2985$, $SE = .0449$, $t = 6.6441$, $p < .001$), and responsible leadership also was significant ($B = .3228$, $SE = .0448$, $t = 7.2000$, $p < .001$). The combined model accounted for 37.51% of the variance in sustainable performance ($R^2 = .3751$) lending support to H3.

Table 4 Regression of Workplace Flexibility and Leadership on Performance

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	1.3248	.1466	9.0367	< .001
Workplace Flexibility	.2985	.0449	6.6441	< .001
Responsible Leadership	.3228	.0448	7.2000	< .001

Model: $R = .6125$; $R^2 = .3751$; $F(2, 319) = 106.9500$, $p < .001$.

The direct path from responsible leadership to sustainable performance was quite robust before the addition of workplace flexibility ($B = .4388$, $SE = .0425$, $t = 10.3345$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .2939$), but it became weaker after the introduction of workplace flexibility ($B = .3228$), which is still significant. The indirect effect that is implied by reported path is $.3887 \times .2985 = .1160$. This decrease, granting that the importance of responsible leadership still exists, can be considered as part mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986) and hence H1 and H4 are supported in the current research study.

Table 5 Summary of Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects

Effect	B	SE	t	p	Interpretation
RL → SP (without WF)	.4388	.0425	10.3345	< .001	Significant direct effect
RL → WF	.3887	.0483	8.0491	< .001	Significant a-path
WF → SP RL	.2985	.0449	6.6441	< .001	Significant b-path
RL → SP WF	.3228	.0448	7.2000	< .001	Significant direct effect
Indirect effect ($a \times b$)	.1160	—	—	—	Partial mediation

Table 6 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Decision
H1	Responsible leadership → Sustainable performance	Supported
H2	Responsible leadership → Workplace flexibility	Supported
H3	Workplace flexibility → Sustainable performance	Supported
H4	Workplace flexibility mediates RL → SP	Supported

Discussion

The results of study validate proposed model. The conceptualization of responsible leadership extending beyond short-term management to ethical behavior and engaging with stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2020; Doh & Quigley, 2014), prior evidence from Pakistan (Huo et al., 2023; Javed et al., 2020), and evidence that the responsible leadership promotes the sustainability through the mechanisms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental innovation, and environmental management (Amir et al., 2022; Liao & Zhang, 2020; Rehman et al., 2023; Abraham, 2024) are consistent with a positive association between responsible leadership and sustainable performance. It also was positively related to workplace flexibility because flexible arrangements are a tangible reflection of its facilitator dimension, which involves caring for employees as key stakeholders (Voegtlin et al., 2020; Maak & Pless, 2006). Workplace flexibility was, in turn, positively correlated with Sustainable performance, consistent with the

flexibility-HRM literature showing that flexible practices are correlated with engagement and performance (Bal & De Lange, 2015; Davidescu et al., 2020) in diverse leading circumstances.

Similarly, the studies also confirm the strategic and HR flexibility positively correlated with firm performance (Xiu et al., 2017; Islam et al., 2026), and flexibility to positive outcomes correlated with empowering leadership (Pahi et al., 2023), flexible work positively correlated with performance through innovative work behavior (Octaviana et al., 2025), and evidence on flexibility correlated with performance through engagement in higher education (Naqshbandi et al., 2023). Finally, workplace flexibility partially mediated the responsible leadership–sustainable performance relationship, as the responsible-leadership coefficient dropped from .4388 to .3228 when it was added; both predictors were still significant. This adds to mediators previously identified, including 'epistemic motivation' (Huo et al., 2023), 'innovation' (Javed et al., 2020), 'sustainable HRM' (Nakra & Kashyap, 2024), 'knowledge sharing' (Wei et al., 2022), 'environmental management' (Rehman et al., 2023), 'digital culture and capabilities' (Shin et al., 2023) and 'employee well-being' (Ahsan & Khawaja, 2024), and the wider finding that leadership influences the sustainability primarily through these mediating factors (Gaybullaevev & Strode, 2026).

Conclusion

This study investigated a possible partial explanation for link between responsible leadership and sustainable education performance – workplace flexibility. Results show that responsible leadership positively relates to workplace flexibility and sustainable performance, workplace flexibility positively relates to sustainable performance, and workplace flexibility partially mediated the relationships between responsible leadership to sustainable performance. Leaders who are ethically responsible, stakeholder oriented, employee focused can impact sustainable institutional outcomes directly, and over implementing flexible arrangements (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Abraham, 2024). The leadership that involves virtuous management of conflicts lowers the interpersonal stress, open communication and constructive problem solving since the employees will be able to concentrate on the objectives of the organization. The research also concludes that the mediating mechanisms of this relationship are the workplace flexibility and workplace inequality. On the whole, results imply that responsible leadership in itself cannot be taken as the measure to contribute to the performance and sustainability of the organization to the utmost; its efficacy can be increased greatly with the help of flexible, inclusive, and fair workplace practices.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study validates importance of stakeholder-oriented responsible leadership for sustainable performance (Maak & Pless, 2006; Doh & Quigley, 2014; Freeman, 1984), adds to the existing literature by identifying another mechanism besides the previously studied ones (Huo et al., 2023; Javed et al., 2020; Nakra & Kashyap, 2024; Wei et al., 2022) and confirms the conclusions of reviews that performance is better explained by intermediate mechanisms than only by direct ones (Boeske, 2023). It also suggests a social-exchange perspective based on Blau's (1964) reciprocal-obligation model, in which the responsible leadership cues support, and flexibility in workplace serves as a means for employees to demonstrate their reciprocity through greater employee effort. The leaders in education should regard responsible leadership and flex arrangements as complementary aspects, much like being able to implement flexibility arrangements alongside high rates of work engagement, which evidence has shown is essential (Naqshbandi et al., 2023), and employ strong and active leader empowerment (Pahi et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2026) and to set clear expectations that flexibility is intended to support rather than disrupt, coordination.

Limitations & Future Research

There are some limitations of the study. There are limitations in making causal inferences due to use of a cross-sectional study design; other studies on responsible leadership use longitudinal or time-lagged designs

could help determine causality. The study's sample has been drawn from institutions in one region of Pakistan, which limits generalizability, comparative studies across different regions, sectors and countries would reinforce the external validity, as called for in sustainable-leadership literature (Gaybullaev & Strode, 2026; Shin et al., 2023). Future research address common method biases (Podsakoff et al., 2003) by incorporating measures as employee perceptions and supervisor or institutional performance measures, and comparing different types of flexibility (schedule, place, autonomy) to identify those likely to influence sustained performance.

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