


# Responsible leadership in the public sector: A sector-specific interpretation

**Author:**Petronella Jonck<sup>1,2</sup> **Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Global Innovative Forefront Talent (GIFT), Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, North-West University, Mafikeng, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Petronella Jonck,  
petronellajonck@hotmail.com

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**Purpose:** Responsible leadership has gained significant attention in contemporary management scholarship. Despite significant advances made in the burgeoning corpus of knowledge, a paucity of studies focusses on developing economies with a dearth of studies underscoring specifically the public sector.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative research methodology was implemented and operationalised by means of a policy analysis. Ascribed to leadership activities within the public sector being linked to policy directives, a policy document analysis was deemed an appropriate approach. Content analysis was utilised as a data analytical method which consists of a systematic evaluation of the content of written or verbal communication for the purpose of identifying themes.

**Findings/results:** Findings are captured in a conceptual framework, which infers that leadership in the context of the public sector is consistent with the tenets of responsible leadership. Themes that emerged from the analysis include leadership antecedents, leadership roles, motivational drivers, and responsibility towards internal and external stakeholders. Leadership antecedents include psychological characteristics, aptitude and conative orientation. Normative, relational and operational roles were evidently stimulated by normative and intrapsychic motivation.

**Practical implications:** The contribution relates to how responsible leadership in terms of theoretical tenets and practical applicability might support policy makers and public sector leaders to improve the implementation of the National Development Plan (NDP) as a societal meta-framework for sustainable development in a multi-stakeholder context.

**Originality/value:** A dearth of research focuses on responsible leadership in the context of a developmental state especially theorising within the public sector indicative of the originality of the research.

**Keywords:** responsible leadership; public service; policy analysis; leadership identity; accountability; reliable.

## Introduction

In recent years, business scandals and misconduct have been pervasive resulting in an emphasis on ethics and leadership responsibilities (Shi & Ye, 2016). Muff et al. (2020) concur that the interminable series of ethical-based scandals has eroded trust in businesses and institutions in general. Specifically, Gracia and Ariño (2015) opine that citizen trust in public administration has been dwindling across the globe ascribed to prevailing economic conditions and corruption, to mention a few. South Africa is experiencing an enormous outpouring of corruption and unethical behaviour, which is defined as the misappropriation of public office for private, material or social gain at the expense of others (Vorster, 2012). Munzhedzi (2016) notes that corruption or unethical behaviour in procurement processes is one of the biggest challenges facing the South African public sector. Mazibuko and Fourie (2017) opine that a culture of non-compliance espoused with a lack of accountability and transparency contributes to extensive looting and unethical practices. Trust in public administration is critical towards fostering the relationship between the citizenry and the public sector (Gracia & Ariño, 2015). Correspondingly, Nunkoo et al. (2012) explain that public trust is pivotal for good governance. Additionally, a decline in public trust threatens institutional legitimacy and by extension, democracy (Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016). Hence, Gracia and Ariño (2015) propose leadership should be cognisant of interventions to be taken to improve trustworthiness among citizens. Therefore, to foster reputability and public trust while addressing sustainable development goals, a novel leadership theory has been put forward, namely responsible leadership (Shi & Ye, 2016; Voegtlin et al., 2012).

**Note:** Special Collection: Leadership in Emerging Economies.

Responsible leadership as a novel theoretical paradigm addresses deficiencies in contemporary leadership theories contributing to promoting reputability and public trust, and achieving sustainable development (Shi & Ye, 2016; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Responsible leadership is deemed as an emerging leadership approach entrenched in purpose and value creation for stakeholders and society with social and relational foci (Enslin et al., 2023). The main thrust of responsible leadership theory includes advancing leadership scholarship by defining the roles, motivational drivers and responsibilities of organisational leaders towards internal and external stakeholders (Ntakumba & De Jongh, 2023). Responsible leadership characteristics include accountability, appropriate moral decision-making, trust, accountability for actions, answerability for decisions and reliability (Maak & Pless, 2011). Koh et al. (2017) conducted a study on responsible leadership in Singapore. Haque et al. (2021) investigated responsible leadership in Bangladesh within an agricultural context. Likewise, Pounder (2021) investigated responsible leadership in the context of tourism in Barbados. De Klerk and Swart (2023) explored responsible leadership in the context of mining industries in emerging economies.

For the most part, empirical evidence relating to responsible leadership emphasises an organisational context, with the public sector being uncharted terrain in so far as current responsible leadership literature is concerned (Ntakumba & de Jong, 2023). A literature search revealed that there is a paucity of studies on responsible leadership within a public sector context. Seibel (2016) conducted a case study underscoring hybridity and responsible leadership in public administration in Germany. Huo et al. (2023) investigated the impact of responsible leadership on sustainable performance moderated by a sustainable climate in public sector organisations in Pakistan. Obuobisa-Darko et al. (2023) identified dominant public sector responsible leadership characteristics to ensure employee engagement in Ghana. Empirical evidence relating to responsible leadership in the public sector within the South African context could not be identified especially as transformational leadership as a leadership approach is used in the South African context (Naidoo, 2011).

Moreover, Pless et al. (2022, p.313) state that although 'significant advances have been made in recent years towards a better understanding of the concept, a gap exists in the understanding of responsible leadership in emerging economies'. As such, South Africa is deemed a developmental state (Jonck, 2017). Kuye (2011) expounds that a developmental state is expressed as development-conscious characterised by economic development being enhanced through political commitment and competent bureaucracy driven by public administration, among others. Thus, a key driver of economic development in the South African context is public sector leadership. Previous author emphasises the need to develop a unique leadership approach entrenched in values such as, *inter alia*, transparency and accountability (Kuye, 2011). A lacuna of research focusses on the leadership

typology requisite to implement the state's vision as a developmental state within the South African context specifically relating to the national development goals underscoring for the most part poverty reduction viz. economic development (Cummings et al., 2017).

Considering the stated, the objective of the research reported on is to explore whether responsible leadership as leadership typology in terms of theoretical tenets and practical applicability can support public sector leaders with the implementation of the National Development Plan (NDP) which represents the national development agenda as a societal meta-framework for sustainable development in a multi-stakeholder context.

## Literature review

### Contextualising public sector leadership

The application of transformational leadership in the context of public sector organisations is prevalent. Recent studies (see, for example Mändla, 2020) suggest that transformational leadership is broadly practised in the public sector with burgeoning evidence alluding to the efficiency thereof resulting in positive organisational outcomes such as public sector motivation and effective performance management (Abane & Phinaitrup, 2017). Moynihan et al. (2014) opine that the current emphasis on transformational leadership in a public sector context aligns with the growing interrogation of the new public management movement, which assumes self-interest, towards emphasising altruistic notions as higher-order needs. In essence, transformational leaders bring about organisational transformation by changing the goals of followers (Fourie & Höhne, 2019). Khan et al. (2016) explain that in transformational leadership theory, there appears to be an alignment with a greater good encompassing involving followers in processes or activities that would yield superior social dividends.

Nilwala et al. (2017) conducted a study on transformational leadership in public sector organisations in Sri Lanka. Previous authors reflecting on the corpus of knowledge expound that transformational leadership occurs when individuals engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers are elevated to higher levels of motivation and morality with the resultant transformation (Nilwala et al., 2017). Three aspects that should be underscored in the mentioned explanation include: (1) social interaction occurs as individuals engage with each other; (2) said interaction occurs between the leader and follower(s) and (3) there is an outcome, namely higher levels of motivation, morality and ultimately transformation. Afjahi et al. (2013) investigate the impact of transformational leadership on public service motivation in Iran. Trottier et al. (2008) note that transformational and transactional leadership were fundamental in the United States federal government.

Despite this, Mändla (2020) reflecting on previous research, notes that public sector leadership is underrepresented in the

corpus of knowledge and does not epitomise an autonomous domain within the field of leadership. Another identified lacuna based on extant research is that transformational leadership underscored the interaction between the leader and employee(s) or follower(s) (Nilwala et al., 2017) and lacks applicability in the wider external organisational context, especially considering accountability towards citizenry which is a key function of the public sector. De Klerk and Jooste (2023), reflecting on previous research (see, for example Maak & Pless, 2009), expound that criticism against existing leadership theories subsumes a lack of responsibility and accountability to external stakeholders which gave rise to the theory of responsible leadership.

### Responsible leadership as theoretical underpinning

Conceptually, responsibility refers to the notion of providing answers which implies being accountable and being able to justify behaviour (Voegtlin et al., 2020). Previous authors conceptualise responsible leadership in accordance with accountability towards diverse stakeholder groups (Voegtlin et al., 2020). Responsible leadership is defined as an orientation or mindset of the management echelon regarding meeting the needs of organisational stakeholders subsuming: (1) defining stakeholders; (2) assessing the legitimacy of their claims and (3) ascertaining how the needs, expectations or interests can best be served (Waldman et al., 2020). Similarly, Haque et al. (2021, p.2) citing Maak and Pless (2009) define responsible leadership as:

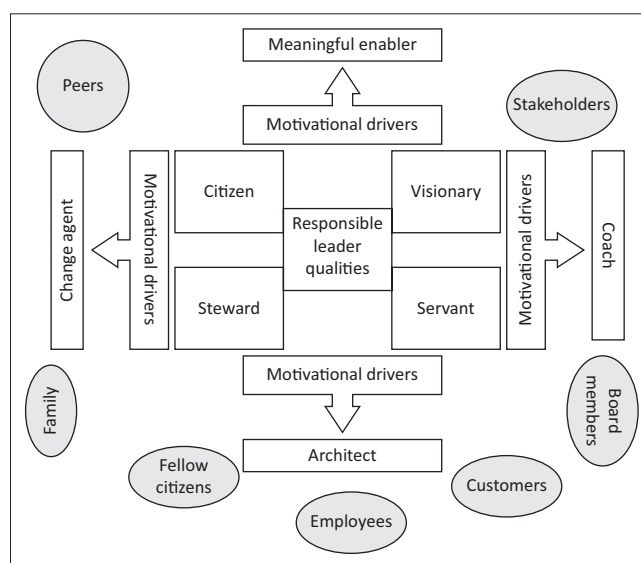
[V]alue-based and principle-driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders who are connected through a shared sense of meaning and purpose through which they raise to higher levels of motivation and commitment for achieving sustainable value creation and responsible change. (p. 539)

Thus, responsible leadership can be understood as a relational and purpose-driven reciprocal process between leaders and stakeholders aimed at establishing accountability in matters pertaining to organisational value creation (Maak et al., 2016). Also, responsible leadership is a leadership approach that focuses on value creation and positive change for a multitude of internal and external organisational stakeholders (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Koh et al. (2017), reflecting on previous research by Waldman (2011), explain that despite multiple definitions of responsible leadership, the central theme centres on balancing the needs and concerns between internal and external stakeholders. Whereas Shi and Ye (2016) opine that leadership ethics is an inherent requirement of responsible leadership which necessitates a leader's adherence to ethical principles and acting accordingly. Liechti (2014), as cited in Muff et al. (2020), put forward a comprehensive definition which underscores: (1) an understanding of system interdependencies; (2) self-knowledge; (3) ethical and value-based attitudes; (4) developing enduring stakeholder relationships and (5) while initiating change towards sustainable development.

Ntakumba and De Jongh (2023) note that responsible leadership theory aims to advance leadership scholarship by

defining the roles, motivational drivers, and responsibilities of organisational leaders towards internal and external stakeholders. In terms of roles, Pless et al. (2022) refer specifically to role models part and parcel of responsible leadership, including normative roles (i.e. visionary), relational role (i.e. servant) and operational role (change agent and coach). Pless (2007) identified two motivational drivers of responsible leadership, such as, *inter alia*, intrapsychic and normative motivation. Intrapsychic motivational drivers encompass: (1) exploration and assertion; (2) attachment and affiliation; and (3) sense of enjoyment. Normative motivational drivers include: (1) a need for justice; (2) needing recognition; and (3) a sense of care (Pless, 2007). Responsible leadership characteristics include accountability, appropriate moral decision-making, trust, accountability for actions, answerable for decisions, and reliability (Maak & Pless, 2011). Zhang et al. (2022) concur and summarise antecedents of responsible leadership to include values, morality, empathy, positive affect, self-actualisation, systems thinking, embracing diversity, emotional awareness, responsibility, community building and systems orientation. Whereas Muff et al. (2020) developed a competency assessment for responsible leadership measuring: (1) stakeholder relations; (2) ethics and values; (3) self-awareness; (4) systems thinking; (5) change and innovation underscoring knowledge, skills and attitude domains.

Considering the theoretical discussion, the widely accepted roles model of responsible leadership put forward by Maak and Pless (2006, p.107) was used as a lens and conceptual framework to analyse the data source (see Figure 1). The rationale for selecting the roles model is based on the assessment by Voegtlin et al. (2020) that the roles model reflects the various obligations of leadership and the heterogenous accountability to stakeholders that espouse leadership.



Source: Adapted from Maak, T., & Pless, N.M. (2006). Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society – A relational perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 66(1), 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9047-z>

FIGURE 1: Roles model of responsible leadership.

According to Figure 1, responsible leadership is surrounded by a network of internal and external stakeholders. To advance collaboration within this network, the responsible leader must fulfil certain roles, such as, steward (viz. custodian of resources), citizen thus part of a community, visionary (viz. inspiring others towards the achievement of a desired future state) and servant (Maak & Pless, 2006). Operationally, to achieve these roles, a responsible leader ought to be an architect of inclusive systems and processes, inspire others to change, provide support and communicate meaning (Maak & Pless, 2006). Mentioned operational roles have been confirmed by Haque et al. (2018). Reflecting on extant research, they expound that a responsible leader motivates and inspires employees while providing psychological support and knowledge sharing in addition to valuing inclusivity and diverse perspectives. However, Voegtlin et al. (2020) distinguish between three roles, namely: (1) expert motivating others towards achieving organisational performance goals; (2) facilitator caring for others and (3) citizen cognisant of the consequences of organisational decision-making on society and environment. Motivational drivers were also included in the conceptual framework in accordance with assertions of Ntakumba and De Jongh (2023) as well as Pless (2007) based on the aim of responsible leadership theory.

The origin of responsible leadership is derived from social relations and ethical theories (Abbas et al., 2022) specifically stakeholder theory (Haque et al., 2018 citing Pless & Maak, 2011). Freeman et al. (2018) expound that stakeholder theory is premised on the explicitly normative notion of assisting leaders with improved decision making relating to the central tenet of engaging stakeholders and value creation for said stakeholder. As such, stakeholder theory suggests the adoption of the relationship between the organisation and those who are affected by it as the unit of analysis to solve three interrelated anomalies, namely: (1) value creation and trade; (2) ethics and capitalism as well as (3) managerial mindset (Parmar et al., 2010). Miska et al. (2014) aptly sum it up by referring to the discretionary and ethical foundation of the social contract between the organisation and broader society. This brings to the fore two caveats that should be considered with reference to responsible leadership research as elucidated by Waldman (2011) including: (1) responsible leadership can be conceptualised and operationalised in accordance with multiple definitions and moral bases; and (2) responsible leadership might be motivated by various ideological paradigms. However, responsible leadership is a beneficial construct within the domain of leadership theory and research.

### Public sector leadership within a developmental state

The South African government's objective of becoming a developmental state is articulated in the National Development Plan (NDP) (Kuye & Ajam, 2012). Costantinos (2012) citing Mkandawire (2001) explains that in the context of a developmental state, the state's vision centres on

ensuring industrialisation and structural change in the productive system, both domestically and relating to its affiliation with the international economy. Implementation of the vision would require public sector leadership to inspire the citizenry to subscribe to the vision, that is, industrialisation and structural change as well as underscoring relations with internal (viz. domestic) and external (viz. international) economic stakeholders. Considering domestic relations, the underlying principles as articulated in the South African Constitution (1996) state that the public sector should provide services fairly, impartially, responsively, accountably, collaboratively and transparently (Kuye & Ajam, 2012). Stated principles should be realised by public sector leadership. Despite this, Thornhill (2015) opines that factors inhibiting accountability subsume unethical conduct, ignorance of citizens, corruption and unproductiveness. Based on these inhibiting factors it would seem as if there is a lack of accountability towards constituents. Hence, Naidoo (2011) notes that a lack of effective leadership and the implementation of inappropriate leadership approaches are evident from, for example, inactive citizenship and public protests ascribed to poor service delivery which is rife in the South African context. Previous author emphasises a critical need for an integrated leadership approach in the public sector and nonetheless proposes an amalgamation of managerial and transformational leadership (Naidoo, 2011). A criticism against existing leadership theory is a lack of responsibility and accountability to external stakeholders (De Klerk & Jooste, 2023). Thus, the mentioned integrated leadership theory might not address the lack of accountability towards constituents, inactive citizenship and service delivery protests. Reflecting on the preceding discussions, a central research question was posed, namely:

*Research question 1: Can responsible leadership in terms of theoretical tenets and practical applicability support public sector leaders with the implementation of the NDP as a societal meta-framework for sustainable development in a multi-stakeholder context?*

## Methodology

As leadership within the public sector domain is linked to policy initiatives, a policy document analysis was implemented. Policy document analysis is an applied means which can be employed as a qualitative research method (Cardno, 2018). The purpose of qualitative research is to describe and interpret phenomena systematically to generate novel concepts and theories (Viswambharan & Priya, 2016). Haradhan (2018) reflecting on the strengths of qualitative research opines that it increases opportunities to develop evidence-based novel ideas and theories, for in-depth exploration of leadership phenomena. A conceptual framework for policy analysis was developed by seminal authors (see, for example Bell & Stevenson, 2006) and incorporated analysing policy from three perspectives, namely, context, content and consequences (Cardno, 2018). The research design was operationalised by means of content analysis of the identified data source, that is the National Development Plan. Haradhan (2018) explains that content



analysis includes: (1) describing the document studied; (2) the characteristics and qualities investigated; (3) a description of the methodology; (4) a frequency table illustrating the frequency of codes and (5) drawing inferences relating to themes found in the text. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) expound that content analysis can be implemented using a three-step approach, namely: (1) coding categories directly from the text, (2) a theory or prior research is used to guide the analysis in the initial coding and (3) summative analysis, where counting categories precedes the interpretation. The implementation of the research design was in accordance with prescribed guiding principles. Firstly, a description of the data source was provided, preceded by an explanation of the methodology. Secondly, data were analysed by coding categories directly from text. The initial coding was guided by the responsible leadership theory in accordance with the conceptual framework adapted from Maak and Pless (2006) (see Figure 1).

In line with the prescribed method proposed by Haradhan (2018) reflecting on extant research, the document source should be elucidated. As such, in the reported research, the National Development Plan (2012) was used as the data source. The National Development Plan (NDP, 2012) is the pronouncement of South Africa's longstanding development agenda and was promulgated in 2012 to provide direction towards socio-economic transformation. Thus, the NDP is deemed a long-term *modus operandi* intended to eradicate poverty, decrease inequality, unite citizenry, stimulate economic growth, promote an inclusive economy, build individual capabilities and enhance leadership competence (National Planning Commission, 2012). Among others, the NDP emphasises promoting effective leadership to solve multifaceted societal anomalies. To this end, the NDP (2012) specifies that effective leadership is the driving force enabling socio-economic development and transformation. Relating to the background of the document source, the National Planning Commission was appointed by political principals to draft the NDP (National Planning Commission, 2012). The rationale for utilising the NDP as a study object is threefold. Firstly, according to the South African National Policy Development Framework (The Presidency RSA, 2020, p. 8), a policy can be defined as the governing party's stated position on internal and/or external matters and provides a written basis in forming operations. As such, the NDP sets out the government's holistic position on sustainable development and influences annual resource allocation for government's spending thus operations until 2030 (Cummings et al., 2017). Hence, the NDP can justifiably be deemed a policy document. Secondly, the introduction of the sustainable development goals has given impetus to the call for responsible leadership and upright corporate citizenship (Muff et al., 2020). The NDP defines national development priorities and provides the foundation for achieving the sustainable development goals (Cummings et al., 2017) necessitating responsible leadership. Thirdly, the content of the NDP is aligned with the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Both SDGs and the NDP emphasise poverty reduction as a keystone and aspire to address job creation, inequality, water security, human

settlements, health, and conservation of biodiversity, to mention a few (Cummings et al., 2017). Against the stated, the NDP is a societal meta-framework for sustainable development in a multi-stakeholder context which necessitates: (1) an understanding of systems interdependencies and (2) initiating a change agenda towards sustainable development. According to Liechti (2014), an understanding of system interdependencies and initiating change towards sustainable development are sub-components of responsible leadership, hence the NDP might be deemed the policy directive that encourages responsible leadership in the South African context.

A policy document analysis was utilised in the research reported on and therefore no interaction with human and/or animal participants arose. Additionally, the study document (i.e. the NDP, 2012) is published on a public platform addressing the *Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act)* requirements.

## Results

In line with the adapted conceptual framework, four themes and 10 sub-themes were identified (see Table 1). The findings are presented sequentially per theme and sub-themes coupled with data excerpts. Results of the initial coding directly from text revealed 91 references were made to leadership towards the achievement of national development priorities in the NDP and 61 references to leaders specifically.

### Theme 1: Leadership antecedents

The first theme identified the responsible leadership characteristics requisite to achieve the national development goals as per the study document. Sub-themes included psychological characteristics, aptitude and conative orientation.

#### Sub-theme 1: Psychological characteristics

Firstly, leadership towards the achievement of the national development priorities requires leaders to be virtuous and upright which necessitates leadership to act according to a moral compass. As such, the NDP states that: 'Leaders have integrity and high ethical standards' [447]. Also,

'Political leaders and public officials should conduct themselves at all times in a manner that would bear the closest public scrutiny. Building integrity is an essential component of achieving good governance.' [447]

And 'Political leaders must realise the effect of their behaviour on the integrity of the political office they hold' [449]. 'Leaders

**TABLE 1:** Themes and sub-themes derived from the content analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Leadership antecedents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological characteristics</li> <li>• Aptitude</li> <li>• Conative orientation</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Roles of responsible leadership towards the achievement of the national development goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normative roles</li> <li>• Relational roles</li> <li>• Operational roles</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Motivational drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normative motivation</li> <li>• Intrapyschic motivation</li> </ul>
Theme 4: Stakeholder relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External stakeholder</li> <li>• Internal stakeholders</li> </ul>

and public figures should demonstrate leadership qualities that include, honesty, integrity and trustworthiness' [474]. Lastly, 'Leaders in government, business and civil society should conduct themselves with integrity and be held to high ethical standards'.

Secondly, responsibility was mentioned as a psychological characteristic. Responsibility is brought into the context of power relations (for example, need for power), willingness to assist others and behavioural intent. An excerpt to this effect states that: 'Leaders throughout society have to balance the power they hold with responsibility ...' [27]. Also, 'With leaders that are willing and able to take on greater responsibility to address South Africa's challenges' [57]. Lastly, responsible leaders ought to anticipate possible work-related behavioural patterns and should act accordingly. As such the NDP states that: 'These leaders are responsible for ensuring that criticism and protest are conducted with dignity and maturity' [58].

Thirdly, leadership essential for achieving the sustainable development goals should have boldness and thus self-confidence. A quotation to this effect states that: 'Address the structural and systemic flaws of the economy and society with strength of leadership, boldness, visionary thinking and innovative planning' [200]. Lastly, being inclusive which could also be deemed as antithesis to ingroup bias referring to including marginalised groups was mentioned as a characteristic of a leader according to the study document. An example to this effect states that: 'The role of women as leaders in all sectors of society should be actively supported' [43]. And 'Leaders should be able to create conditions that allow everyone to communicate in open dialogue' [475].

### Sub-theme 2: Aptitude

Considering the aptitude needed to achieve national development goals, the study document refers to professional and technical skills. As such it is stated that: 'People who lead institutions must have the required leadership capability and high-level technical competence ...' [336]. Furthermore, leaders ought to have communication skills. Therefore, it is written that: 'Leaders should be able to create conditions that allow everyone to communicate in open dialogue' [475]. Furthermore, leadership should be able to collaborate with others which could be deemed as part of teamwork skills and encompasses working together with various internal and external stakeholders. An excerpt to this effect states: '... leaders and staff are committed to working together to improve performance' [55]. Also, 'Leaders working together to solve complex problems' [1]. An example of working with external stakeholders includes: '... draw on the leadership and capabilities of its business community if it is to strengthen collaboration ...' [238]. Planning and problem-solving skills are also mentioned as competencies prerequisite of leadership to achieve the national development goals. Regarding planning, the study document refers to innovative and careful planning. See, for example: 'Address the structural and systemic flaws of the economy and society with strength

of leadership, boldness, visionary thinking and innovative planning' [200]. Also: 'These are difficult issues, requiring honest reflection, careful planning and decisive leadership' [59]. Lastly, considering problem-solving, it is noted that leadership must focus on solving societal problems as evident from the following quotations: 'Strong leadership throughout society working together to solve our problems' [26]. Also: '... lack of leadership in finding appropriate solutions' [409]. Another excerpt noted: 'Leaders working together to solve complex problems' [1].

### Sub-theme 3: Conative orientation

Lastly, considering the antecedents of leadership as enshrined in the study document, several behavioural aspects are mentioned such as accountability. Thus, leadership should act in such a way that the leader could be held accountable for overt behaviour. Excerpts to this effect include: 'There need to be systems to hold all leaders in society accountable for their conduct' [60]. And: 'Leadership positions to lead effectively and be held accountable when things go wrong' [426]. Also: '... hold leaders accountable for their actions' [27]. Lastly, 'crucial for political leaders and public officials to account to the citizens for their actions' [446]. Another conative orientation subsumes reliability and being steadfast which in essence refers to being consistent and acting in an anticipated manner. Examples to this effect include: 'This means stable leadership is a prerequisite for improving performance' [441]. Also, 'government's best-performing institutions are characterised by their stability of leadership and policy approach' [411]. Furthermore, leadership should be responsive to stakeholders; see for example 'leaders take action when problems are brought to their attention' [447]. Lastly, leadership should empower stakeholders and be role models which requires a behavioural intent. Excerpts to this effect include: 'Leaders must seek to empower the otherwise powerless, building bridges to other sectors of society' [475]. And: 'Leaders and other influential people can provide role models' [330].

## Theme 2: Roles of responsible leadership towards the achievement of the national development goals

### Sub-theme 4: Normative roles

Content analysis relating to the roles of leadership as per the study document emphasises the role of a visionary, namely providing inspiration towards achieving a desired future state specifically the accomplishment of the vision enshrined in the South African Constitution. An excerpt to this effect is as follows: 'Strong leadership is needed to promote the vision of the Constitution' [35]. Also:

'Achieving this vision will require leadership on land reform, communal tenure security, infrastructure and financial and technical support to farmers, and capacity building to enable state institutions and private industries to implement these interventions.' [234]

Another quotation includes: 'Demonstrating strategic leadership among stakeholders to mobilise around a national

vision' [121]. Another quote to this effect states: 'The public signing of an agreement represents an important symbolic commitment by leadership and a public statement of what is important' [314]. Considering specifically providing inspiration, the study document mentioned that: 'Active citizenship requires inspirational leadership at all levels of society' [474]. And: 'Inspirational leadership across all levels of society and active citizens, reinforce and strengthen each other' [478]. Also: 'Meeting the objectives of the plan requires leadership to drive implementation, and to convince South Africans of the need to make mutual sacrifices for longer-term benefits' [39]. The plan refers to the vision and leadership that ought to inspire citizens to make sacrifices towards a desired future state. Similarly, 'Strong leadership is about making such decisions and effectively persuading society that the best path is being pursued' [57].

### Sub-theme 5: Relational roles

When considering relational leadership roles, being a servant and emphasising service delivery, which is a key responsibility of public service leadership, came to the fore. As such, the study document states: 'leadership in the government must ensure a more concerted and coordinated effort to implement agreed programmes' [121]. In terms of specific government spheres such as health care, the NDP (2012) noted:

'The health system requires competent leaders and managers at all levels – from clinic to tertiary hospital. From a governance perspective, competent leaders are required in all structures from district to national level.' (p. 336)

Another relational role that emerges from the study document is that of a citizen being part of the community as evidenced from the excerpt: 'Strong leadership throughout society working together to solve our problems' [26]. In terms of relational roles, being a meaningful enabler underscoring communication or storytelling was also included under this sub-heading. An excerpt to this effect notes: '... leadership plays an important role in facilitating communication with South Africa's citizens to improve the effectiveness of developmental local government' [233]. Additionally, a leader must enable meaningful relationships between various stakeholders, for example: 'Leaders must [...], building bridges to other sectors of society' [475].

### Sub-theme 6: Operational roles

Considering operational roles, four were identified in the study document and analysed under this sub-theme, namely, change agent, coach, mentor and or role model, steward, and architect. Considering the first operational role, namely change agent, the study document mentions that leadership should be the driving force behind change inspiring citizens to make sacrifices for the greater good. An excerpt to this effect is: 'Meeting the objectives of the plan requires leadership to drive implementation, and to convince South Africans of the need to make mutual sacrifices for longer-term benefits' [39]. Another example of being a change agent as per the study document is related to addressing

inequalities. See, for example: 'Worker leaders have to advance and defend the interests of employed workers, and with other sectors of society, ensure that inequality is reduced' [156]. The aforementioned excerpt also refers to the role of being a steward or custodian within the context of public sector employment. The second operational role identified is that of a coach or role model. As such, the study document explained that leadership should be deemed role models in society and empower the powerless. For example, 'Leaders and other influential people can provide role models' [330] and 'Leaders must seek to empower the otherwise powerless, building bridges to other sectors of society' [475]. Furthermore, in terms of being a coach which entails providing emotional support, the study document notes that: 'solutions require leadership, which will allay public fears and increase perceptions of safety' [405]. The last operational role of an architect necessitates the implementation of processes and systems which also came to the fore in the study document. An example to this effect states that: 'It requires leadership, sound policies, skilled managers and workers, clear lines of accountability, appropriate systems, and consistent and fair application of rules' [54].

## Theme 3: Motivational drivers

### Sub-theme 7: Normative motivation

Findings of the content analysis revealed that a people-centric approach was predominant in the study document hinging on a sense of care for others and thus a normative motivational driver. An example specifies that:

'The approach of the plan revolves around citizens being active in development, a capable and developmental state able to intervene to correct our historical inequities, and strong leadership throughout society working together to solve our problems.' [1]

This excerpt also refers to correcting historical inequities which underscore a need for restorative justice (viz. normative motivational driver). Another excerpt that confirms a sense of care about others and collective interests noted that: 'South Africa needs the active support of all citizens, leadership in all sectors that puts the country's collective interests ahead of narrow, short-term goals, and radically improved government performance' [28]. Another excerpt noted that: 'This is all-encompassing leadership that empowers people and places them at the centre of development' [475]. The excerpt above refers to a people-centric emphasis recognising people as fundamental which could also refer to recognition as a normative motivational driver.

### Sub-theme 8: Intrapsychic motivation

Results of the content analysis revealed an intrapsychic motivational driver specifically attachment and affiliation thus being part of a group and identifying as a South African. This is evident from: 'Strong leadership throughout society working together to solve our problems' [26]. Furthermore, with reference to the relational impetus and affirming groups and societal affiliation, the study document



states that: 'Leadership does not refer to one person, or even a tight collective of people' [474]. Lastly, social cohesion, which is mentioned, hinges on intrapsychic motivation, for example: 'Leadership, active citizenry, and effective government can help drive development in a socially cohesive environment' [26].

## Theme 4: Stakeholder relations

### Sub-theme 9: Responsibility towards internal stakeholders

When considering responsibility towards internal stakeholders, the study document in most cases refers to internal employees, for example: 'Work Leaders have to advance and defend the interests of employed workers, [to] ensure that inequality is reduced' [156]. Furthermore: 'It requires leadership, sound policies, skilled managers and workers, clear lines of accountability, appropriate systems, and consistent and fair application of rules' [54]. Another example states that: 'Union leadership is critical to ensuring that gains by members are sustainable in the long term' [58].

### Sub-theme 10: Responsibility towards external stakeholders

In terms of external stakeholders, leadership has a responsibility to various stakeholders as explained by: 'The ability to do this is a function of leadership among all social partners' [155]. The social partners mostly identified include the private sector, labour and citizenry. This is evident from: 'The successful implementation of this plan requires strong leadership from government, business, labour and civil society' [57]. One external stakeholder is the private sector as noted by: 'Leadership is required to ensure that businesses act more responsibly' [58]. Leadership in the context of the NDP is also responsible towards communities, for example: 'Meeting the objectives of the plan requires leadership to drive implementation, and to convince South Africans of the need to make mutual sacrifices for longer-term benefits' [39]. Moreover, 'Strong leadership is about making such decisions and effectively persuading society that the best path is being pursued' [57]. Another excerpt notes that: 'solutions require leadership, which will allay public fears and increase perceptions of safety' [405]. Leadership has also a responsibility towards previously marginalised groups as evident from: 'The role of women as leaders in all sectors of society should be actively supported' [43].

## Discussion

In line with research conducted by Ntakumba and De Jongh (2023) as well as Maak and Pless (2006), the findings reported aimed to advance responsible leadership scholarship within the context of the public sector specifically underscoring the national development goals such as the sustainable development goals by defining responsible leadership characteristics, roles, motivational drivers and responsibilities of public sector leaders towards internal and external stakeholders. As such, leadership in a public sector context which is consistent with the notion of responsible leadership

emphasises system interdependency, ethical and value-based attitudes, establishing and maintaining enduring relationships with all social partners especially citizenry towards sustainable development. This definition supports the notion of responsible leadership mentioned by Muff et al. (2020) and Liechti (2014). As per Waldman et al. (2020), responsible leadership is defined as an orientation or mindset of management echelon regarding meeting the needs of organisational stakeholders which is congruent with the role of leadership in the NDP (2012).

In terms of results presented, several leadership characteristics were identified, such as, being responsible, collaborative, accountable, reliable, inclusive, virtuous, upright, bold and responsive. These results confirm the responsible leadership characteristics identified by Maak and Pless (2011) which include accountability, appropriate moral decision-making, trust, accountability for actions, answerability for decisions and reliability. Similarly, the ethical nature of responsible leadership confirms research by Shi and Ye (2016). In the same vein, De Klerk and Jooste (2023) identified 20 responsible leadership characteristics, such as, *inter alia*, being accountable, collaborative, visionary and ethical without distinguishing between a characteristic, an aptitude or a behavioural intent. Considering the roles of leadership, the results presented confirm research by Pless et al. (2022) referring specifically to role models as part and parcel of responsible leadership, including normative, relational and operational roles. Normative roles centred on being visionary. Thus, the emphasis of leadership as mentioned in the NDP centres on meeting the needs of stakeholders in accordance with the vision enshrined in the Constitution. Inspiring citizens towards achieving a desired future state which in the case of the NDP is achieving the national development goals. Relational roles, according to Pless et al. (2022), include, for example being a servant. In the research reported on, three roles were identified under relational roles, namely being a servant, a citizen as part of a community and a meaningful enabler which can only be found in the context of others, thus within a relational context. Lastly, operational roles included being a change agent and coach (Pless et al., 2022). Operational roles in the research reported on included change agent, coach/role model/mentor, steward and architect. These roles facilitate the implementation of the vision and are usually found within the employment context of public servants. The results presented align with the three roles mentioned by Voegtlin et al. (2020), namely: (1) expert motivating others towards achieving organisational performance goals (*viz.* visionary inspiring citizens towards achieving the national development goals); (2) facilitator caring for others (*viz.* mentor/role model/coach and servant) and (3) citizen cognisant of the consequences of organisational decision-making on society and the environment.

Considering the motivational drivers, two were identified in the research reported here, namely intrapsychic and normative motivation. Specifically in terms of intrapsychic motivation, there was an emphasis on attachment and affiliation thus part of a social group. Normative motivation



underscored a need for justice, recognising others and a sense of care. Notably, the NDP emphasised normative motivation. The results presented are in accordance with Pless (2007) and specifically intrapsychic motivational drivers encompass: (1) exploration and assertion; (2) attachment and affiliation and (3) a sense of enjoyment. Normative motivational drivers include: (1) a need for justice; (2) needing recognition and (3) a sense of care (Pless, 2007). Lastly, the research presented defined internal (i.e. public sector employees) and external (i.e. private sector, business and citizenry) stakeholders and mentioned ways to best serve their interests which is in line with the definition of responsible leadership mentioned by Waldman et al. (2020).

Based on the results presented and in accordance with the theoretical underpinning, a revised conceptual framework is proposed for responsible leadership in the public service.

As can be deduced from Figure 2, responsible leader antecedents are at the centre of the revised framework. The antecedents consist of psychological characteristics, aptitude and conative orientation which represent behavioural intent. Nevertheless, the leadership position or role is implicit in the conceptual framework. The Roles model adapted from the seminal work by Maak and Pless (2006) is centered on responsible leadership qualities but does not distinguish between qualities and does not mention the assumed leadership position. Similarly, De Klerk and Jooste (2023) mentioned the leadership characteristics without distinguishing between the characteristics. The mentioned theoretical underpinning has four roles, namely visionary, servant, citizen and steward. Followed by motivational drivers motivating or inspiring subliminal roles, for example coach, change agent, meaningful enabler and architect. In the revised conceptual framework, motivational drivers inspire three roles intrinsic to responsible leadership, *inter alia*, normative motivation inspires normative and operational roles, while intrapsychic motivation encourages relational roles. Collaboratively, antecedents and roles influence

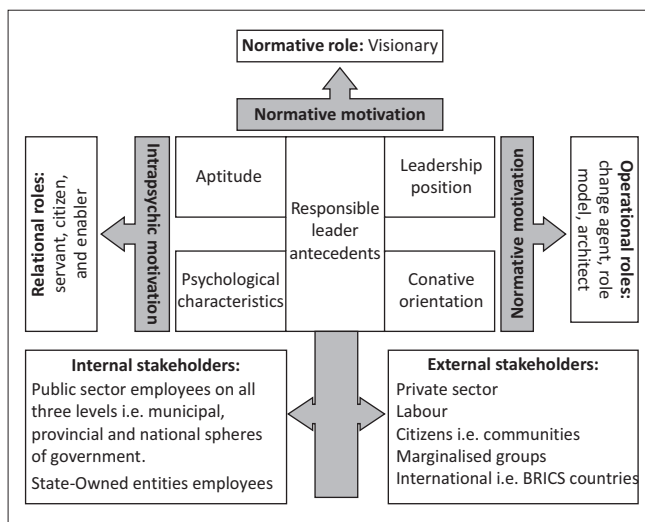


FIGURE 2: Responsible leadership in the public service conceptual framework.

stakeholder relations with internal and external stakeholders. The last mention is comparable with the theoretical underpinning illustrated in Figure 1; however, the stakeholders vary. Furthermore, the stakeholders align with the two domains identified by De Klerk and Jooste (2023), that is, micro and meso-domain. The internal stakeholders represent the micro-domain, while the external stakeholders represent the meso-domain. The macro-domain did not come to the fore.

The findings of the study support assertions by De Kerk and Jooste (2023) that leadership, as depicted in the NDP, strives towards reputability, active citizenship, accountability and long-term sustainability which are pivotal for fostering public trust to ensure good governance, institutional legitimacy and by extension support democracy (see, for example Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016; Nunkoo et al., 2012). This emphasises the significance of the public sector especially considering that South Africa is a developmental state in which economic development is driven by public administration/state structures (Kuye, 2011). Based on the findings presented, responsible leadership in terms of theoretical tenets and practical applicability can support policy makers and public sector leaders with the implementation of the NDP as a societal meta-framework for sustainable development in a multi-stakeholder context.

## Conclusion

Responsible leadership has emerged as a leadership approach rooted in purpose and value creation for internal and external stakeholders with a relational focus. The impetus for the emergence of the mentioned leadership approach is a result of ethical-based misconduct which has eroded trust in organisations and institutions in addition to the advent of the sustainable development goals. Moreover, despite significant advances being made in recent years towards a better understanding of the concept, responsible leadership has not been extensively researched in a public sector context. Hence, the study aimed to address the mentioned gap by defining the antecedents, roles, motivational drivers and stakeholders of responsible leadership within the South African public sector context underscoring specifically South Africa as a developmental state. Based on the results presented, a theoretical framework for responsible public sector leadership in a developmental state was proposed. The contribution of the research relates to how responsible leadership in terms of theoretical tenets and practical applicability might support policy makers and public sector leaders to improve the implementation of the NDP as a societal meta-framework for sustainable development in a multi-stakeholder context. Furthermore, the theoretical framework could be utilised to further stimulate empirical inquiry utilising primary research methodologies. Future research could focus on developing a questionnaire to verify the mentioned theoretical framework.

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The author declared that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

P.J. is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available online [www.gov.za/documents/other/national-development-plan-2030-our-future-make-it-work-15-aug-2012](http://www.gov.za/documents/other/national-development-plan-2030-our-future-make-it-work-15-aug-2012).

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