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Leading for a Greener Future: How Green Vertical Leadership Shapes Innovation and Project Success

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ABSTRACT: Sustainability is a strategic priority for businesses. This study examines how green vertical leadership influences green project performance, with green proactive and reactive innovation as mediators. Green vertical leadership, marked by centralized decision-making and strategic oversight, enhances compliance-driven sustainability and structured innovation. Results show that green vertical leadership fosters both proactive and reactive innovation, improving environmental efficiency and project outcomes. Green proactive innovation drives long-term sustainability, while green reactive innovation ensures regulatory adherence. Both innovation types link leadership to green project success. This study extends stewardship and organizational learning theories, highlighting leadership's role in sustainability-driven innovation. It offers insights for business leaders and policymakers, emphasizing the need to balance strategic control with innovation for effective sustainability management.

KEYWORDS: Green vertical leadership, sustainability, green project performance, proactive innovation, reactive innovation, environmental compliance, stewardship theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become a strategic necessity for organizations globally, especially in rapidly industrializing areas like Jiangsu Province, China. The province has undergone substantial economic growth, along with heightened regulatory demands and public expectations for environmental accountability (Jiang et al., 2022). As organizations confront the intricacies of incorporating sustainable practices into their operations, leadership has emerged as a pivotal factor influencing green project effectiveness (Odeyemi et al., 2024). This style of leadership ensures compliance with environmental standards and promotes green innovation by systematically integrating sustainability initiatives into business operations. While the impact of different leadership ideologies on an organization's sustainability remains uncertain, effective leaders foster innovative approaches to ongoing environmental challenges (Adewale, 2024). Organizations are progressively incorporating sustainable practices into their operations, with leadership being instrumental in advocating for eco-friendly initiatives. The effectiveness of green initiatives, including ecological efficiency, innovation focused on sustainability, and corporate responsibility towards the environment, has become an essential measure for evaluating the success of corporate sustainability efforts (Ateeq & Ibrahim, 2024). The distinct, structured, and methodical approach of green vertical leadership is readily identifiable. Recent findings indicate that leadership styles significantly influence environmental initiatives (Zhong et al., 2025). This leadership style enhances the effectiveness of environmental projects by clearly defining decision-makers, promoting a collective vision for the future, and increasing accountability among all participants. Recent findings indicate that leadership significantly influences environmental innovation; however, the precise relationship between leadership practices and the success of projects remains unclear (Reed, 2008). This research utilizes stewardship theory and organizational learning theory to investigate the impact of green vertical leadership on green project performance, with a mediation effect from green proactive and reactive innovation. Green proactive innovation involves voluntary and anticipatory actions focused on enhancing the environment, while green reactive innovation is mainly driven by compliance, responding to external pressures like regulations and market demands (Fok et al., 2023).

This study examines the impact of both proactive and reactive green innovation on the effectiveness of green initiatives and leadership through the lens of stewardship and organizational learning. Green proactive innovation refers to voluntary, anticipatory measures aimed at environmental improvement, whereas green reactive innovation is primarily compliance-driven, responding to external pressures such as governmental regulations and industry standards.

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Understanding how leadership fosters innovation and enhances project performance within a sustainability framework is crucial for organizations in Jiangsu Province, where economic development must align with environmental stewardship. This study provides empirical insights into how green vertical leadership promotes green innovation, thereby enhancing green project performance and addressing this research gap. The findings offer significant insights for scholars and industry professionals aiming to formulate leadership strategies that are in harmony with sustainability goals. Financial success and environmental accountability need organizations to grasp the relationship between leadership, innovation, and project success in a sustainable framework. We address a gap in the literature by showing that green vertical leadership may boost green project performance, innovation, and creativity. Future theory and practice research are affected by the findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Green Vertical Leadership and Green Project Performance

Implementing green vertical leadership is a crucial factor in steering organizations towards sustained success. Through a systematic decision-making process, this approach ensures that team members align with the company's sustainability objectives (Caiado et al., 2023). This management style fosters organizational sustainability through structured accountability, strategic oversight, and enhanced compliance measures (Efunniyi et al., 2024). The influence of leadership on the effectiveness of environmentally friendly initiatives is clear in the results. Effective leadership plays a crucial role in the allocation of resources, engaging stakeholders, and integrating sustainable practices (Boeske, 2023; Doh & Quigley, 2014).

Hypothesis 1: Green vertical leadership has a positive effect on green project performance.

2.2. Green Vertical Leadership and Green Proactive Innovation

Green proactive innovation includes deliberate and calculated projects aimed at developing sustainable goods, services, and processes (Chen et al., 2016). Leaders who follow a sustainable vertical approach set explicit policies that motivate staff members to participate in proactive actions, therefore creating a culture of environmental responsibility and creativity (Ahmed et al., 2024). Green vertical leadership does this by defining sustainability-focused objectives and carrying out planned growth strategies, therefore creating an environment that supports proactive sustainability projects. To differentiate themselves from rivals and support the development of long-term value, companies should give sustainable and progressive innovation top priority (Gutterman, 2024; Jayashree et al., 2022).

Hypothesis 2: Green vertical leadership positively influences green proactive innovation.

2.3. Green Vertical Leadership and Green Reactive Innovation

Unlike proactive innovation, green reactive innovation is motivated by outside forces such market needs and legal standards (Chan et al., 2022). By promoting a culture of regulatory compliance and strategy alignment, green vertical leadership helps to guarantee that companies respond properly to these outside forces (Lear, 2012). Those who implement sustainability policies and define unambiguous environmental goals enable companies to react properly to outside pressures (Teeter & Sandberg, 2017). Green vertical leadership can thereby improve an organization's capacity to effectively carry out reactive innovation plans (He et al., 2023).

Hypothesis 3: Green vertical leadership positively influences green reactive innovation.

2.4. Green Proactive Innovation and Green Project Performance

By incorporating sustainability ideas into the company's fundamental strategy, green proactive innovation greatly improves green project performance (Yuan & Cao, 2022). Proactive innovation helps companies to create environmentally friendly solutions that not only lower environmental impact but also improve operational efficiency and stakeholder confidence (Le et al., 2024). Proactive innovation may promote environmental responsibility and long-term project success by including sustainability into corporate processes (Yuan & Cao, 2022).

Hypothesis 4: Green proactive innovation has a positive effect on green project performance.

2.5. Green Reactive Innovation and Green Project Performance

Reactive innovation helps to follow rules and fulfil company and public expectations (Voegtlin et al., 2022). Green reactive innovation helps companies to grow their consumer base, minimize environmental effects, and keep their brand. Reactive innovation provides structured innovation in reaction to external environmental needs, hence enabling green initiatives to flourish. Green

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reactive innovation helps companies to satisfy stakeholder expectations and change with changing environmental conditions (Lv et al., 2018). Akhtar et al. (2024) claim that proactive companies might do well in addressing legal concerns, following industry norms, and enhancing their environmental reputation. Proactive and sustainable projects help companies to react to outside forces and help them to last. Sometimes reactive creativity is seen as silly.

H5: Green reactive innovation has a positive effect on green project performance.

2.6. The Mediating Role of Green Proactive Innovation

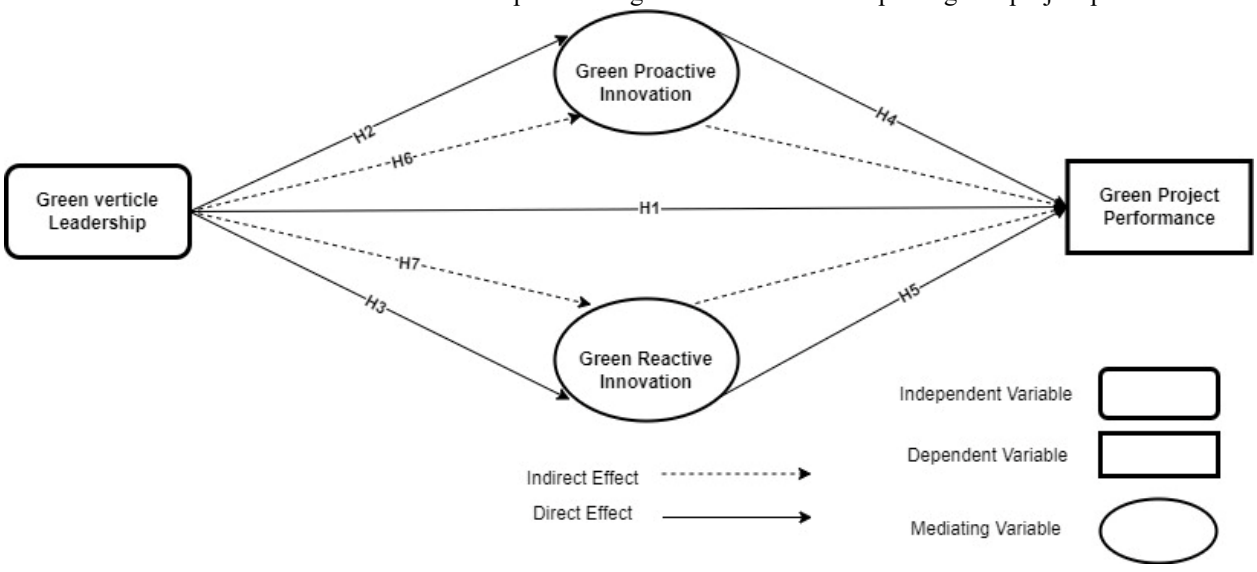
New criteria for evaluating sustainability initiatives spearheaded by CEOs have highlighted the significance of environmental protection. Findings from the study indicate that environmentally conscious CEOs are associated with more transparent sustainability initiatives and financial support for existing green initiatives (Shahab et al., 2020). This approach encourages ongoing enhanced project execution, which therefore boosts market competitiveness and resource efficiency (Shrivastava, 2018). Aggressively inventing, companies may strengthen themselves against legislative changes. Thus, without the arrival of environmentally friendly technology driven by proactive and top-down strategies, green initiatives cannot thrive (Gabriel et al., 2022).

H6: Green proactive innovation mediates the relationship between green vertical leadership and green project performance.

2.7. The Mediating Role of Green Reactive Innovation

Green reactive innovation meets stakeholders' expectations and ensures adherence to environmental regulations (Jayaraman et al., 2023). Regulatory compliance is dependent on reactive innovation instead of proactive innovation, as the latter is influenced by external factors rather than a strategic framework (Ramanathan et al., 2017). Green vertical leadership fosters a compliance culture, ensuring that sustainability activities adhere to industry norms and standards. Effective risk management, reactive innovation, and operational consistency need strict policy adherence and monitoring (Singh et al., 2022). Establishing a more robust connection between executive support for green initiatives and adherence to regulations is an effective approach to enhance environmentally sustainable reactive innovation. Effective reactive innovation enables businesses to reduce their negative environmental impact while adhering to all sustainability standards (Baah et al., 2021).

H7: Green reactive innovation mediates the relationship between green vertical leadership and green project performance.



3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data Collection

This study concentrated on companies engaged in sustainability initiatives. Building companies with a strong environmental dedication provide a good starting point for the study. Emphasizing companies that have adopted environmental management and sustainability policies, the dataset was generated using a stratified random sample method (Altaf et al., 2016; Naveed et al., 2020).

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A multiple-respondent strategy was used to help to reduce common technique bias (Podsakoff et al., 2024). While project managers assessed green innovation techniques and project performance results, senior managers in charge of sustainability projects responded concerning green horizontal leadership. This method made it possible to evaluate the relations among the investigated variables more objectively.

A web-based survey tool was employed for data collection, and the option of augmenting it with phone interviews was also contemplated (Butt et al., 2019). Employees were required to have at least two years of experience in their roles to ensure a thorough understanding of the company's environmental initiatives. (Holtom et al., 2022) conducted a study using a survey that involved a recent sample of 58 companies, achieving a response rate of 40%.

3.2. Sampling Size and Technique

The nature of the present study was cross-sectional and investigated the construction projects of Jiangsu province, China. We have selected 58 big construction industries as a population and 540 employees as a sample. A simple random sampling technique was used to gather data. We collected data with the help of a questionnaire through an online survey (Fricker, 2008). We translated questionnaires into two languages English and Chinese from professional translators to minimize the biasness (He & van de Vijver, 2012). Finally, we got 323 questionnaires from employees who were properly marked and some of the questionnaires were discarded due to improper and incomplete filing of data.

Table 1: Demographics

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	204	63.16%
Female	119	36.84%
Age		
20–30 years	98	30.34%
31–40 years	188	58.20%
41–50 years	70	21.67%
> 50 years	33	10.22%
Years of Professional Experience		
Less than 3 years		
4-6 years	15	4.64%
7-10 years	84	26.00%
More than 10 years	173	53.56%
Position in Firm	51	15.79%
CEO		
Senior manager	15	4.64%
Manager	37	11.46%
Assistant Manager	25	7.73%
Other supervisory position	185	57.27%
	61	18.88%

3.3. Measures

The study designed a questionnaire with the help of guidelines mentioned in previous literature published work by several researchers. In this study, we have investigated two independent variables (Green Performance and Mastery climates) one as a mediator variable (Green Innovation) and one dependent variable (Green Project performance). The response was collected using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to agree strongly) (Altaf et al., 2016).

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3.4. Reliability and Validity Test

Table 1. EFA Factor Loading

Constructs	Measurement	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	VIF
Green Vertical Leadership (GVL)	GVL 1	0.811	0.889	0.945	0.671	2.44
	GVL 2	0.768				
	GVL 3	0.811				
	GVL 4	0.821				
	GVL 5	0.867				
	GVL 6	0.858				
	GVL 7	0.844				
	GVL 8	0.742				
	GVL 9	0.736				
	GVL 10	0.854				
	GVL 11	0.841				
Green Proactive Innovation (GPI)	GPC 1	0.912	0.866	0.868	0.521	1.86
	GPC 2	0.732				
	GPC 3	0.835				
	GPC 4	0.784				
Green Reactive Innovation (GRI)	GRI 1	0.861	0.893	0.871	0.544	2.59
	GRI 2	0.861				
	GRI 3	0.723				
	GRI 4	0.905				
Green Project Performance (GPP)			0.827	0.895	0.584	1.97
(i)Environmental Performance	EP 1	0.821				
	EP 2	0.810				
	EP 3	0.731				
	EP 4	0.849				
(ii)Financial Performance	FP 1	0.769				
	FP 2	0.875				
	FP 3	0.921				
	FP 3	0.889				
	FP 4	0.873				
	FP 6	0.878				
	FP 7	0.814				
(iii)Stakeholders Satisfaction	SS 1	0.833				
	SS 2	0.847				
	SS 3	0.851				
	SS 4	0.782				
	SS 5	0.733				
	SS 6	0.733				
	SS 7	0.851				
	SS 8	0.797				
	SS 9	0.902				

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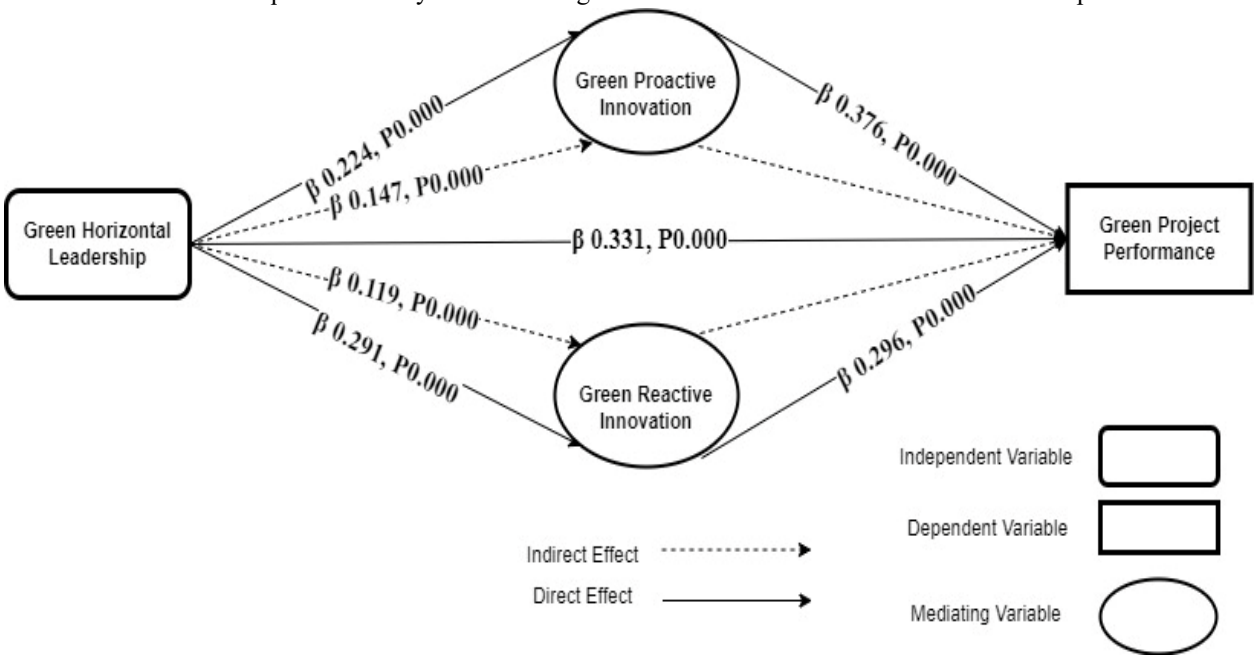
Table 2. Discriminant Validity

	GVL	GPI	GRI	GPP
GVL	0.821			
GPI	0.789	0.785		
GRI	0.324	0.291	0.846	
GPP	0.767	0.740	0.269	0.853

3.5. Results and Data Analysis

The structural equation modeling SEM method was used to test the hypotheses. This method was used to check the causal effect between indicators. This technique was widely used in management science research to measure relationships.



3.6. Test of Hypotheses

Table 3. Direct Effects

Hypotheses	Relationship	β	T	p	Supported/Not Supported
H1	GVL and GPP	0.331	3.855	0.000	Supported
H2	GPI and GPP	0.224	2.639	0.000	Supported
H3	GRI and GPP	0.291	2.242	0.000	Supported
H4	GVL and GPI	0.376	2.735	0.000	Supported
H5	GVL and GRI	0.296	3.726	0.000	Supported

Table 4. Indirect Effects

Hypotheses	Relationship	β	T	p	Supported/Not Supported
H6	GVL, GPI and GPP	0.147	2.943	0.000	Supported
H7	GVL, GRI and GPP	0.119	2.685	0.000	Supported

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Table 5. Mediation through Bootstrapping

IVs	Standardized Indirect Effect	Lower	Upper	Standardized Direct Effect	Total Effect	Results
GVL-GI- GPP	0.186	0.148	0.713	0.534	0.652	Partial mediation
GVL-GI-GPP	0.095	0.051	0.731	0.365	0.475	Partial mediation

4. DISCUSSION

The results of H1 indicate that green vertical leadership significantly enhances green project performance (β = 0.331, T = 3.855, p = 0.000). Organizations employing centralized leadership structures gain clear strategic direction, regulatory compliance, and well-coordinated sustainability programs, resulting in enhanced environmental outcomes (Boeske, 2023; Doh & Quigley, 2014). Leaders at the highest levels of an organization align environmentally responsible initiatives with the organization's overarching objectives by formulating sustainability strategies, ensuring adherence to relevant regulations, and efficiently allocating resources (Efunniyi et al., 2024). The findings of this inquiry provide robust support for H2 (β = 0.224, T = 2.639, p = 0.000). Given these results, it is evident that senior executives are crucial in fostering a culture of environmental innovation and integrating sustainability into the company's strategic vision for the future (Gutterman, 2024; Jayashree et al., 2022). The results for H3 (β = 0.291, T = 2.242, p = 0.000) underscore the significance of vertical leadership in promoting compliance, enabling organizations to rapidly adapt to shifts in regulations, market demands, and public expectations (Chan et al., 2022; He et al., 2023). In a similar vein, H4 (β = 0.296, T = 3.726, p = 0.000) demonstrates that green proactive innovation exerts a significant positive influence on green projects. Proactive innovation enables organizations to set themselves apart in competitive markets, enhance resource efficiency, and strengthen their sustainability reputation, leading to improved long-term project outcomes (Le et al., 2024; Yuan & Cao, 2022). The findings support Hypothesis 5 (β = 0.219, T = 2.622, p = 0.000). The research demonstrates that enterprises proficient in regulatory adaptation and sustainability compliance processes attain superior project execution, stakeholder trust, and environmental legitimacy (Lv et al., 2018; Voegtlin et al., 2022). H6 (β = 0.147, T = 2.943, p < 0.001) The findings validate that green proactive innovation serves as a crucial mediator between green vertical leadership and green project performance (Shrivastava, 2018). Leaders who adopt structured sustainability strategies and invest in long-term innovation enhance project performance by encouraging voluntary sustainability initiatives. The mediating effect demonstrates that proactive innovation serves as a channel, enabling the successful conversion of leadership's sustainability vision into significant environmental initiatives (Gabriel et al., 2022; Shahab et al., 2020). The results confirm H7 (β = 0.119, T = 2.685, p = 0.000), supporting the mediating role of green reactive innovation in the relationship between green vertical leadership and green project performance. Vertical leaders enforce compliance, create structured sustainability frameworks, and align business activities with environmental policies, leading to improved project results (Jayaraman et al., 2023). The mediating effect emphasizes that vertical leadership, on its own, may not directly impact the success of green projects; however, its effectiveness is enhanced when reactive innovation supports compliance and risk reduction (Ramanathan et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2022).

5. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Practical Implications

The results hold significant relevance for organizations aiming to enhance the effectiveness of their environmentally friendly initiatives through sustainability strategies driven by leadership. To ensure that the organization's environmental goals are achieved, green vertical leadership creates a structured approach for sustainable management. Organizations ought to incorporate sustainability into leadership training to strengthen hierarchical decision-making in environmental management. Strategically allocate resources to foster both proactive and reactive innovation in sustainability initiatives. Strengthen regulatory compliance systems by implementing leadership-focused sustainability frameworks to enhance adherence to environmental policies. Furthermore, decision-makers can leverage these insights to formulate sustainability guidelines centered on leadership that highlight the importance of structured oversight in environmental initiatives.

Theoretical Implications

This study enhances the understanding of leadership and innovation by illustrating the unique influence of vertical leadership on sustainability outcomes. In contrast to earlier studies that highlight decentralized leadership in environmental initiatives, our findings

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indicate that hierarchical leadership structures can successfully foster both compliance-driven and proactive sustainability efforts. These findings facilitate future exploration of the relationship between different leadership styles and environmental innovation in diverse organizational contexts.

6. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study took place in Jiangsu Province, China, a region experiencing significant economic growth while complying with stringent environmental regulations set by the national government. Future research should explore additional geographical and regulatory contexts to enhance the significance of the findings. The investigations concentrate exclusively on sustainable vertical leadership. It would be valuable to explore both vertical and horizontal strategies in future studies to determine if one leadership style proves more effective in fostering long-term success compared to the other. This paper primarily focuses on green proactive and reactive innovation; however, future inquiries could explore additional dimensions of green innovation, such as open innovation, digital transformation, and circular economy concepts. A cross-sectional strategy was utilized, limiting the comprehension of the long-term effects of leadership on the success of green initiatives. Future research should adopt longitudinal frameworks to observe the evolving impacts of leadership across time. This study focuses on sustainability outcomes influenced by leadership. Future research should incorporate employee perspectives to understand the influence of hierarchical leadership on sustainability engagement across different organizational levels.

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