



## **From Vision to Victory: Strategic Journeys of Top Business Leaders in Sri Lanka**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the leadership experiences, strategies, and success factors of prominent Sri Lankan corporate leaders within a rapidly evolving economic and social environment. Using qualitative focus group discussions with leaders from the manufacturing, hospitality, service, and export sectors, the study combines narrative analysis with a systematic literature review of 50 publications from 2015 to 2025. Addressing the limited representation of Global South perspectives in leadership research, the findings highlight five interconnected leadership themes shaped by family enterprise dynamics, gendered challenges, crisis management, and people-centric governance. While the findings support several established global leadership theories, they also reveal the need for cultural adaptation in applying these models to South Asian contexts. The study concludes that Sri Lankan leadership reflects a hybrid approach that is simultaneously strategic, relational, values-driven, and resilient, contributing to the growing discourse on indigenous leadership in developing economies.

*Keywords:* Family enterprises and succession planning, Leadership in emerging markets, Narrative analysis, Sri Lankan business leaders, transformational and strategic leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's constantly evolving global business environment, corporate strategy and effective leadership have become central themes, as they guarantee the long-term viability and competitiveness of corporations. The function of visionary business leadership is crucial and complex, particularly in developing nations such as Sri Lanka, where organizations are often operating in conditions influenced by resource constraints, market fluctuations and socio-political shifts (Yousef Farhan, 2024). Despite all these obstacles, a number of Sri Lankan business leaders have demonstrated high levels of strategic capabilities, transforming local businesses into regional and international brands (De Silva & Mudalige, 2019). Their experiences, which are often overlooked in the general academic literature, offer unique perspectives into how business leaders in emerging countries overcome barriers, establish long-term goals and create resilient and adaptive workplaces.

One great source of such insights is the lived experience and strategic reflection of business leaders themselves. Thus, the study draws on focus group discussions with CEOs and senior managers across multiple industries in Sri Lanka. Even though these narratives offer a wealth of qualitative knowledge, they have not been rigorously examined from an academic perspective, particularly regarding corporate leadership in Sri Lanka. Thus, this study aims to address this gap by comprehensively analysing the success narratives of Sri Lankan business leaders, with the objective of extracting strategic plans and leadership themes that elucidate their trajectories towards success.

Despite the growing awareness of leadership as a critical element in determining business performance, there is an apparent shortage of research that evaluates real-world experiences and strategic decisions made by Sri Lankan corporate leaders (Ratnayake & Amarasinghe, 2025). Most of the current literature highly concentrates on quantitative metrics or broad leadership approaches embraced by Western contexts (Sant'Anna, 2024), often overlooking the complex, culturally ingrained leadership frameworks that exist in the Sri Lankan socioeconomic atmosphere. Contextual research is a part of the development of indigenous leadership models, yet it has not been developed, limiting the ability of local entrepreneurs and researchers to use successful practitioners within their respective communities (Coates et al., 2024).

In academic discourse, the stories of thriving Sri Lankan CEOs remain largely unexplored. There is an inadequate number of studies that utilize

narrative or content analysis of real-life executive anecdotes to reach strategic conclusions (Erbaş, 2023). Moreover, studies that integrate leadership theory with practical, case-based data from techniques such as focus group discussions are particularly lacking (Hailu & Verrier, 2024).

The current research is a leading attempt in the field of leadership research, strategic management, and business development research in the context of emerging economies, which investigates the leadership journeys of Chief Executive Officers in Sri Lanka by utilizing qualitative research methods. Furthermore, it illustrates key concepts through real-world success stories, including strategic innovation, visionary thinking, adaptability, ethical management, and talent development.

The findings of this study are important from an academic and practical perspective. It offers scholars a culturally and contextually enriched perspective by introducing an innovative methodological approach to the study of leadership through narrative analysis of business reporting. Moreover, the study provides practical insights and inspiration which derived precisely from their peers' achievements, specifically for potential entrepreneurs and business executives in Sri Lanka and other emerging nations. Additionally, the current research highlights the need for policymakers and educators to introduce the stories of local leaders as role models in professional education and curriculum development, thereby fostering a stronger entrepreneurial environment in Sri Lanka.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction to Leadership Studies in Emerging Nations**

Leadership Studies have expanded from a sole focus on personal characteristics and behaviours to incorporate contextual, strategic, and cultural aspects of leadership (Arghode et al., 2021). Leadership development in emerging economies, such as Sri Lanka, is affected by environmental volatility, institutional vacuums, and socio-cultural norms (Selvarajah et al., 2020). Environmental volatility includes macroeconomic dynamics, regulatory uncertainty, policy unpredictability, and institutional gaps, involving poor governance arrangements, uneven regulation, and state capacity (Ruesga Rath et al., 2021). The socio-cultural norms, in this respect, imply patterns of collaborative thinking on gender roles, spheres of control, and relations between

the public and the private (Şahin et al., 2024). These factors, in combination, have complex interactions that determine leadership practices in institutions. However, most of the global literature focuses on the Western paradigm, disregarding how leadership functions in situations where leaders have to reconcile tradition, challenges and globalization simultaneously. This article critically analyses Sri Lankan leadership narratives through the perspective of modern leadership theory to address this knowledge gap.

The inspiring conversations with business leaders from various industry sectors, such as manufacturing, hospitality, service and exports, provide a well-grounded and contextually nuanced analysis of Sri Lankan leadership (Siriwardena, 2025). Their lived experiences correspond with key themes in the literature on transformational leadership, family enterprise governance, resilience and gender empowerment, strategic flexibility and human capital development.

### **Transformational Leadership and Strategic Vision**

Transformational leadership has continued to receive more attention in scholarly circles as a critical factor determining organizational effectiveness, employee performance, and sustainable competitive advantages (Suryadi et al., 2024). This leadership style can be described as one that is more concerned with inspiring and motivating followers to go beyond their selfish interests in order to serve the organization and thereby bring about a major transformation in the cultural and operational aspects of several sectors within the Sri Lankan economy.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive correlation between transformational leadership and employee performance. Studies suggest that transformational leaders may motivate and engage staff, thereby significantly enhancing the performance of industrial businesses in Sri Lanka (Balasuriya & Perera, 2021). However, studies also indicate that the focus on innovation and adaptation may disrupt long-standing trends, causing employees to feel overwhelmed and at risk of burnout (Parveen & Adeinat, 2019). Furthermore, in the hospitality sector, a vital player in Sri Lanka's economy, transformational leadership aligns with sustainability and green initiatives. According to Samarasinghe et al., the innovative practices of transformational leaders in the hotel industry can promote economic advantages and environmental sustainability at the same time (D. Samarasinghe et al., 2024). Moreover, the

dynamics that lead to successful strategic outcomes are further revealed by examining the relationship between leadership approaches and organizational culture (Karunasekara et al., 2021). According to existing studies, transformational leadership affects employee outcomes and shapes corporate culture in ways that foster innovation and adaptability to dynamic market conditions (Ahmadi et al., 2023). Conversely, transformational leadership has been termed as being unethical in some research. Critics continue to argue that its rhetoric can manipulate feelings rather than rational thinking. They also claim that it lacks checks and balances, as in democratic decision-making and power distribution structures (Indradewa & Santiajie, 2024).

The fundamental concepts of transformational leadership are especially evident in the leadership journey of one of the top business and academic leaders, whose personal transformation from missing out on the university to becoming a globally renowned academic and administrative leader illustrates this approach (Siriwardena, 2025). His dedication to linking academia and industry corresponds with (Zhang et al., 2023), which focuses on moral leadership and places a priority on evolution that is beneficial to both individuals and organizations.

Similarly, the leadership of a CEO from the tourism and hospitality sector can be described as visionary and agile. Based on the insights shared during the focused group discussion, the way he focused on clear communication, team empowerment, and customer-oriented innovation in a crisis situation proves the leadership qualities of strategic thinking and flexibility, which are the main features of agile leadership in turbulent environments (Siriwardena, 2025). These scenarios highlight how transformational leadership in Sri Lanka is often shaped by hardships, and how long-term objectives diverge from transactional models common in business settings in Western countries.

### **Gender, Resilience and Authentic Leadership**

The role of women's leadership and strength in the patriarchal setting of Sri Lankan society is a valuable lens for understanding the obstacles and successes of women's leadership in overcoming the society's hardships. Despite improvements in female representation in different spheres, women in Sri Lanka still meet systemic challenges that are based on patriarchal customs, social norms, and culturally constructed gender roles (Weerakoon, 2023).

In the context of Sri Lanka, female leaders often encounter expectations and illustrations imposed by a culture that has traditionally favoured male dominance. Studies mention that although having women in local governance might promote feelings of justice and trust, the insecure character of female leadership in a patriarchal setting is demonstrated by the fact that initial positive assessments can rapidly erode if women fall short of societal standards (Baniamin & Jamil, 2021). Moreover, women leaders' resilience is demonstrated by the history of female political participation in Sri Lanka, particularly during periods of ethnic conflict. In her discussion of the important role that women's movements have played in promoting political transformation and peace, Samarasinghe emphasizes how adaptable and powerful they are in spite of structural injustices (Samarasinghe, 2012).

Furthermore, the representation of women in the corporate governance process has seen mixed success. Fernando et al. indicate that companies with diverse boardrooms (that have female directors) have a greater performance in their sustainability objectives, and this implies that gender diversity in top management directly correlates to positive corporate performance (Fernando et al., 2021). However, it is demonstrated that deeply established stereotypes and systematic bias frequently discredit this relationship, which keeps women out of the decision-making process. Additionally, the "glass ceiling" phenomenon further complicates female participation in leadership roles. Despite their significant presence in the workforce, women still remain marginalized in managerial roles in Sri Lankan firms, revealing persisting barriers to professional advancements (Samanmalie & Anjalika, 2023).

The perceived limitations for female leadership were contested during a discussion with a successful female entrepreneur from the manufacturing sector. Her experience as a leading female entrepreneur in a male-dominated industry is an illustration of authentic leadership (Zhu, 2025), in which decisions are taken based on social responsibility, personal integrity, and core values. In her conversation, she expressed that women should see obstacles in their way as opportunities, which clearly indicates the inspirational qualities of a successful female entrepreneur. Moreover, her story supports the "*labyrinth*" metaphor, which presents women's leadership development as irregular and fraught with subtle barriers (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Although the existing literature concentrates on the structural reforms and organizational inclusion strategies, the success of this female entrepreneur relied on personal agency, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Her case is an indicator of the necessity to conduct further research on women's leadership experience in Sri Lanka, especially research that addresses the intersection of identity, power, and performance in the sphere of entrepreneurship.

### **Family Business Leadership and Succession Planning**

The family business leadership patterns and succession planning in Sri Lanka are a captivating example of the multifaceted interplay of cultural norms, economic necessities and business sustainability. Family businesses play a critical role in the economy of emerging nations such as Sri Lanka, and succession planning plays an important role in determining the sustainability of such businesses in the long run (Kisang Asongwe, 2023).

Family enterprises in Sri Lanka are often characterized by strong intergenerational links and deeply established cultural beliefs in familial loyalty and tradition. This setting can foster a conducive framework for long-term business practices by transmitting founders' implicit knowledge and experience to their successors (Lucia et al., 2023). However, research has shown that this may lead to reluctance towards transformation and innovation, as younger generations may struggle to incorporate modern business techniques while adhering to conventional standards (Gil et al., 2024). Furthermore, succession planning is especially important for Sri Lankan family businesses where leadership changeover is sometimes fraught with emotional and relationship issues. Yasmeen et al. note that effective succession must be organized and systematic through the process of training and mentoring and exposure to management roles over a period of time to nurture future successors, as opposed to the appointment of a successor on the basis of bloodlines (Yasmeen et al., 2022). However, according to some studies, the effectiveness of succession planning in Sri Lanka is limited by cultural factors that often place greater importance on family relationships than on competencies and meritocracy (Mimasha et al., 2022). This can leave successors unprepared to handle the complications of contemporary corporate management. Moreover, leadership styles have significant effects on succession planning in family businesses. Leadership competencies impact not only the business performance but also the sustainability of the family business. Recent research by Jayawardena et al. suggests that implementing transformational leadership approaches facilitates

easier transitions and better prepares successors for their future duties (Jayawardena et al., 2023).

With reference to the focus group discussion, the leadership of a chairman from a manufacturing and export company is a prime example of proactive and value-driven succession planning (Siriwardena, 2025). His emphasis on guiding his son, who is both locally experienced and internationally educated, demonstrates the concept of intentional succession (Adkins et al., 2024), where intergenerational leadership development is integrated into the corporate firm's strategic vision.

Furthermore, his approach challenges the idea that South Asian family enterprises are reluctant to change or unprofessional. His story illustrates the hybrid model of leadership, which is the model that embraces the modern transformation while managing it with traditions, and it is a combination of family stewardship and professional governance (Nasr et al., 2025). Thus, to adequately account for culturally rooted behaviours and strategic vision, this perspective urges a re-evaluation of family business theories in developing countries.

### **Strategic Innovation, Agility and Organizational Transformation**

Strategic innovation and organizational change are essential for Sri Lankan corporate enterprises to remain resilient and sustainable, particularly in the circumstances of local challenges and a rapidly evolving global economy (Athambawa, 2020). Numerous pressures are compelling Sri Lankan businesses to innovate and change their modes of operation. These factors can influence culture, economy, and technology in shaping how these companies embrace innovative practices and undergo transformational changes.

According to studies, the innovative landscape of Sri Lanka has been shaped by a variety of factors, such as the legislative framework, socio-economic factors, and technological capabilities. Also, the importance of collaborative approaches between local educational institutes and businesses has been emphasized towards promoting innovation in the country (Wijesinghe et al., 2021). Another observation by the authors is that developing a conducive environment for ICT innovation is critical to increasing the competitiveness of Sri Lankan businesses. The existence of traditional business structures in Sri Lanka contributes to this obstacle, as businesses may be resistant to change and tend to maintain the status quo.

Furthermore, studies emphasize the significance of adopting strategic practices in Sri Lankan businesses that align with both their goals and broader market trends (Gamage et al., 2020). This includes participation in world trends, local consumer demands, and the use of technology to make operations more efficient (Javaid et al., 2024). The growing focus on sustainability requires businesses to restructure and reengineer their business models, ensuring they consider sustainable solutions in their strategic innovation processes.

According to a real-world scenario shared during the focus group discussion, the strategic plan of a managing director from the manufacturing and export sector demonstrates dynamic capabilities, which are characterized by ERP adoption, HRIS systems, and product diversification (Siddique et al., 2025). His data-driven, systems-oriented leadership can be explained by his transformation towards structured, analytical decision-making, as opposed to the more traditional, intuition-driven management portrayed by Mintzberg (1994) in his emergent strategy.

Most importantly, the innovations discussed in the focus group discussion occur in more conventional industry sectors, such as construction chemicals and hospitality, suggesting that innovative thinking in emerging markets is not confined to technological industry sectors (Emma, 2025). These cases add to a growing body of knowledge which supports broadening the conceptualizations of innovation to encompass adaptive practices, process reengineering and business model transformation in low-resource settings.

### **Human Capital and People-centric Leadership**

People-centred leadership and human capital are two essential elements in the landscape of organizational performance in Sri Lanka. As firms traverse the complexities of an emerging economy that presents both opportunities and challenges, comprehending how human capital is appreciated and utilized throughout successful leadership practices becomes critical.

Human capital deals with knowledge, skills and competencies that individuals possess and can offer at the workplace, and thus it is recognized as a vital asset to organizational success. Weligamage argues about the significance of the valuation of human capital in Sri Lanka, and he also indicates that companies should invest in education and training in order to maximize the potential of human resources (Weligamage, 2023). However, he further examines that the current circumstances in Sri Lanka present that organizations often struggle

with the use of human resource development practices, even though the significance of human capital is acknowledged. For instance, public investment in education, unemployment rates, and labour force engagement rates highlight the broader challenges in optimizing the development of human capital (Weligamage, 2023).

Along with that, people-centric leadership is defined by its focus on personal development, empowerment and participation in the workforce. This leadership style contrasts with conventional authoritarian leadership and fosters a more participatory environment. Pandey and Mahesh argue that the people-oriented approach to leadership will contribute to the enhanced managerial performance and the establishment of an organizational culture that permits the innovation and cooperation (Pandey & Mahesh, 2025). In the context of Sri Lanka, where hierarchical structures are frequently prevalent, shifting to a more cooperative leadership model can improve staff engagement and productivity while mitigating resistance to change. Furthermore, the link between human capital and leadership plays a crucial role in optimizing the performance of an organization. Ajanthan and Kumara emphasize that human capital may be more efficiently used with the help of effective corporate governance, such as the presence of effective leadership oversight (Ajanthan & Kumara, 2017). People-oriented organizations have a better chance of utilizing their human resources well, and the bottom line is that they will achieve better financial results and sustainable growth.

With reference to a conversation at a focus group discussion, HR focuses on generational diversity, corporate branding, structured onboarding, and employee well-being of a group HR director in the manufacturing and export sector, which is a reflection of HR transformation from administrative tasks to a strategic partner (Siriwardena, 2025). This strategy conforms with inclusive and sustainable HRM models that provide corporate culture, leadership pipelines, and long-term talent growth as top priorities (Kaliannan et al., 2023). Unlike the typical hierarchical models, which tend to prevail in the South Asian organizations, the philosophy of HR offered by this particular this sector focuses on the idea of mentorship, openness, and meritocracy.

### **Conclusion of the Literature Review**

This review shows that the Sri Lankan business leadership, as expressed in the narratives of the focus group discussion and findings from relevant literature, cannot be entirely explained with generalized Western theories. Rather, it needs a subtle, situation-specific strategy that blends aspects of

personal background, cultural integration, strategic vision, and institutional flexibility. Through a thematic and critical analysis of these leadership narratives, this study contributes to an expanding body of knowledge on leadership in emerging economies and offers a practical framework for how Sri Lankan leaders can operate amid complexity, create a legacy, and deliver sustainable growth.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The research design of this study is a mixed-methods approach that includes a systematic literature review and a narrative inquiry.

The systematic literature review uses a sample of the 50 most pertinent publications from 2015 to 2025 on leadership approaches and key themes of leadership in the context of Sri Lanka, critically appraising and synthesizing quantitative findings. Along with that, a narrative inquiry approach is used to explore the real-world leadership experiences, strategic plans and pathways to success of prominent business leaders through a focus group discussion.

### **Data Source and Sampling**

The primary data for the study were derived from qualitative focus group discussions conducted with a selected group of senior business leaders in Sri Lanka. The participants represented a diverse range of industries, including academia, manufacturing, hospitality, retail, and export-oriented businesses. The following profiles were featured in the focus group (anonymity of names and organisational characters has been maintained to respect confidentiality and ethical considerations).

- A senior academic leader and professional association president from the education and marketing sector
- A female entrepreneur and the chairperson of the manufacturing and export sector
- A CEO from the hospitality and retail sector
- A chairman of a diversified business group involved in construction-related manufacturing and plantation exports
- A group managing director responsible for operational transformation and digital systems implementation in a family-owned business group

- A group HR director specializing in people strategy, talent development, and organizational culture in a multi-sector enterprise.

These individuals are selected based on purposive sampling as their profiles contain organizational, personal, and strategic information pertinent to the objective of this study.

The relevant research articles are selected through comprehensive, systematic searches conducted in scholarly databases such as EBSCOhost, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Scopus. Keywords including "leadership approaches," "Sri Lankan business leaders," "organizational transformation," "Family businesses," "Women leadership," "Sri Lanka," and similar terms are used.

Adhering to best practices of narrative reviews, a purposive sampling approach was used in which papers were selected on the basis of theoretical contribution, methodological rigor, geographical focus and relevance.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section is an integrated analysis of insights concerning the narrative analysis of the Sri Lankan business leaders featured in the focus group discussion and the thematic findings of the systematic literature review. The themes are organized around the following key dimensions of modern leadership.

### **Transformational Leadership and Strategic Vision**

The biography of a senior academic and business leader reflects the transformational leadership which is embedded in education, humility and a deep sense of purpose. His career path, which has passed through refusal to enrol in a university and a career as a global academic leader, demonstrates perseverance and a long-term effort to break down barriers between the academic and corporate worlds.

During the focus group discussion, the leader emphasized how his early work experience in service-oriented roles impacted his knowledge in leadership, finance, marketing and interpersonal dynamics.

His leadership reflects the traits emphasized by (Saqib Khan et al., 2022), including stimulation of thoughts, idealized influence and inspirational motivation. Furthermore, by emphasizing talent development and organizational transformation, this leader further illustrates moral leadership,

which is presented in previous literature (Huhtala et al., 2020), as an approach that prioritizes collective upliftment rather than individual gains.

These findings support the idea that transformational leadership in developing nations is often driven by personal adversity and social purpose rather than official authority and charisma alone (Rule & Regehr, 2024).

### **Gendered Leadership and Entrepreneurial Resilience**

The issue of gender, resilience, and authentic leadership intersects with the story of a leading female entrepreneur in the manufacturing and export sector, who has been successful in a male-dominated industry. Her story emphasizes that she is a rebel against the patriarchy and that she is determined to pave the way for women to enter the field of business leadership.

During the discussion, she shared that her entrepreneurial journey started when a few people believed in her. Over time, her confidence grew through persistence and self-reliance, and she mentioned that her current aspiration is to support and motivate others pursuing similar paths.

Her journey aligns with the concept of authentic leadership (Chen & Sriphon, 2022), as her decisions are firmly based on her life experiences and personal values. Her leadership also demonstrates “labyrinth” (Carli & Eagly, 2016), presenting how female leaders in South Asia navigate multifaceted structures and cultural barriers.

According to the observations, this narration critiques the underrepresentation of female leadership figures in Sri Lankan business literature, highlighting the need to examine leadership as identity in context as well as a function (Nettikumara, 2022).

### **Family Leadership and Succession Planning**

The experience of a chairman in the manufacturing and export sector is a unique and educational story of succession planning and values-based governance of a family business in Sri Lanka. His story emphasizes legacy, faith and the necessity to train the next generation both technically and ethically.

He emphasized in the focus group discussion that succession planning should not be perceived as a simple transfer of responsibilities. Instead, it was described as a strategic and value-driven approach, aimed at guaranteeing long-

term continuity and organizational resilience that extends beyond current leadership.

His son, who was exposed to the global education and mentored within the local organizations, represents the future of family businesses of emerging markets. This notion supports the idea of intentional succession (Adkins et al., 2024), and shows the growing trend towards professionalization in family enterprises.

According to the findings, his story challenges the stereotype of change-averse South Asian family businesses and offers a guide to hybrid leadership that combines family heritage with international strategic thinking.

### **Strategic Innovations and Organizational Transformation**

Operational modernization and strategic innovation are emphasized by a group managing director in the manufacturing and exports sector. The introduction of ERP and HRIS systems, product line diversification, and an emphasis on sustainability are examples of a transition from entrepreneurial leadership to system-based management.

During the discussion, he demonstrated that his leadership prioritizes developing organizational structures that support both efficient scaling and sustainable development.

His system-driven approach aligns with the theory of dynamic capabilities (Ostadi et al., 2024), which emphasizes the shift and transformation of corporate firms in response to changing environments. His leadership also illustrates the increasing importance of evidence-based decision-making in leadership literature (Capezio & L'Espoir Decosta, 2023), specifically in developing countries where strategic practice has traditionally been controlled by intuition.

This theme shows that innovation in Sri Lanka no longer exists only in the tech start-ups but is bringing out innovation in construction, agriculture and FMCG industries as well, with the use of digitalization and streamlining of operations.

## **Human-centred HR Leadership**

Another top-level manager, who is the Group HR Director in the manufacturing and export sector, champions a people- and strategy-oriented HR philosophy. The fact that he focuses on employer branding, generational diversity, and a well-organised mentorship shows that he represents a more contemporary concept of HR within which leadership development and organizational culture are carefully constructed.

During the focus group discussion, he emphasized that the success of an organization is rooted in its people, with a strong focus on establishing a culture where every employee is supported and developed as a potential future leader.

His strategy is in line with the HR competence model, which argues that HR must surpass transactional duties to become a strategic partner in developing culture and leadership pipelines (Kess-Momoh et al., 2024). Moreover, his recognition of generational diversity and employee well-being reflects growing research on inclusive and sustainable HRM (Bai, 2025).

As per the findings, the current theme marks a significant change in the Sri Lankan HRM leadership: the shift to the dominance of the engagement, empowerment, and the methodical development of the long-term capability.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study examines leadership approaches, strategies, success stories and life experiences of prominent Sri Lankan business leaders who featured in a focus group discussion. By a combination of narrative analysis and systematic literature review, the study discovered five interconnected leadership themes: transformational leadership and strategic vision, gendered leadership and resilience, family leadership and succession planning, strategic innovation and organizational transformation and human-centred HR leadership.

The narratives of prominent business leaders from various industry sectors, such as manufacturing, exports, academia, hospitality, retail and from the field of human resources, offer rich, context-specific insights into how leadership is exercised in Sri Lanka's complex and constantly volatile business landscape. When analyzed critically with regard to the literature on global leadership, these narratives both support and expand on the preexisting theories.

- Authentic and transformational leadership are highly personal, culturally based journeys rather than generic concepts.

- Female leaders in Sri Lanka navigate structural and cultural constraints with resilience, belief and innovation.
- Agility, succession, and the digitalization of the world have become high-profile dynamics in the conventional industries, driven by an upsurge of a new generation of strategic thinkers.
- In family-owned and diversified group companies, strategic HRM and inclusive leadership are becoming key facilitators of long-term corporate success.

This inquiry puts theories of leadership in the context of the South Asia, where leadership is grafted along with kinship, social identity, historical legacy, and national development projects. The synthesis of narrative data and existing scholarly knowledge enables the study to provide a more detailed and empirically grounded picture of leadership in emerging markets.

### **Recommendations**

The study seeks to offer recommendations for practitioners, policy makers and future academics based on the integrated findings.

The study recommends that business leaders and entrepreneurs invest in transformational leadership, which involves fostering resilience, purpose, and adaptability within leadership teams. The leadership career paths of leaders in the manufacturing, export, and hospitality sectors indicate that long-term success is based on vision and the ability to handle crises. Furthermore, family businesses should prioritize succession planning, incorporating legacy with professionalism to guarantee sustainability and generational continuity. Additionally, businesses should adopt systems and innovation in even traditional industries, as efficiency, transparency, and scalability can be substantially enhanced by using digital solutions such as ERP and HRIS.

Furthermore, policymakers are recommended to create structures and platforms to highlight women's leadership stories and to motivate and mentor the next generation of female leaders. Moreover, they should provide targeted policy support and development programs for women's entrepreneurship, designed with an emphasis on access to finance, leadership development training, and network building, especially in male-dominated sectors.

Future researchers are provided with the insights to conduct longitudinal studies on leadership in Sri Lanka and similar developing nations to better comprehend the contexts, challenges and cultural shapes over time. Furthermore, they need to use mixed-method approaches, combining narrative, case study, and quantitative techniques to enhance the depth and validity of leadership research in South Asia.

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